The Thesis Committee for Marcia Ashley Black
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following Thesis:

Storing Our Memories in the Water:
Black Women's Organizing in the Detroit Water Crisis

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Nicole Burrowes, Supervisor

Ciaran Trace

Storing Our Memories in the Water:
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Marcia Ashley Black

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Beloved Detroit and the freedom fighters who defend her.

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Abstract

Storing Our Memories in the Water:
Black Women's Organizing in the Detroit Water Crisis

Marcia Ashley Black, MA, MSIS

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Supervisor: Nicole Burrowes, Co-Supervisor: Ciaran Trace

This research documents and presents a history of Black women's organizing against water shutoffs, and for access to clean and affordable water. Using the oral histories of Black women water organizers this research will historicize the Detroit water crisis, explore the reasons why Black women have been core leaders within this fight, and examine the types of intellectual traditions embodied in their water organizing. By documenting their organizing, this research situates Black women water warriors as critical actors in the Detroit water crisis struggle, and as shapers of the radical Black organizing tradition in Detroit. This research will use critical oral history and Black feminist epistemology to address the following questions: How has water's role, as a necessary, life-sustaining household and communal resource, influenced Black women organizers' response to the Detroit water crisis? What types of intellectual traditions are present in their organizing and what types of organizing traditions are they creating? What impact have their relationships to each other had on the fight for water rights in Detroit? How can a

Black queer feminist approach to archiving support ongoing efforts to document and preserve Black women's histories and intellectualism?

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Chapter Summaries: Storing Our Memories in the Water

INTRODUCTION

This section is an introduction to the issue of water rights in Detroit, providing context on the scale and impact of the water crisis thus far, and examining what is at stake in the process. This section will also include a description of the purpose of the thesis, including the limitations of and future aspirations for this project.

CHAPTER ONE: METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter details the methodology for this thesis and explains my use of critical oral history methods and community archiving in my research. In addition, this section includes a literature review discussing the influence of memory, Black Detroit History, Black Environmental Justice, and Black feminism on the topic at hand and how these insights and viewpoints influence the types of interventions my research aims to make.

CHAPTER TWO: CONVERSATIONS FROM THE FRONT LINE

This chapter provides a list of the Black women warriors as recited by Detroit organizer Mama Lila, followed by short profiles on the Black women whose oral histories inform this research. This is followed by an exploration of four core themes found in the oral histories and historical moments in the Detroit water crisis: organic intellectualism and (a) radical Black feminism: discovery of mass water shutoffs, (b) memory is sacred: Charity Hicks #wage love speech, (c) narrative is power: Lydia et.al water case, and (d) local, regional, and global solidarity in the Flint water crisis. These are moments that have been identified as crucial and transformative moments in the water struggle.

CONCLUSION

This is the concluding section that discusses the limitations and future aspirations for this project as it continues. As part of looking to the future, it will also explain a Black Queer Feminist Archival Praxis and how it can be used as a tool to re-engage historical organizing moments, with Black women and Black queer folks as agents of knowledge, whose lived experiences shape our plans for Black liberation.

Introduction

My research documents and presents a history of Black women's organizing against water shutoffs and for access to clean and affordable water. In documenting their organizing this research aims to situate Black women as critical agents in the narrative of the Detroit water crisis and shapers of the radical Black organizing tradition in Detroit. Using the oral histories of Black women water organizers this project will retell major historical events in the Detroit water crisis, explore the reasons why Black women have taken on core leadership within this fight, and examine the types of intellectual traditions embodied in their water organizing. My research will address the following questions: How has the role of water, as a necessary, life-sustaining household and communal resource, influenced Black women organizers' response to the Detroit water crisis? What types of intellectual traditions are present in their organizing and what types of organizing traditions are they creating? What impact has their relationships to each other had on the fight for water rights in Detroit? How can a Black feminist approach to archiving support ongoing efforts to document and preserve Black women's histories and intellectualism?

This research project has had many iterations and from its genesis, Mama Lila, a Black women water warrior and well-loved Detroit organizer has been a supporter and collaborative partner in this project. She passed away in January 2019. Her loss shook the core of Detroit's organizing community. Charity Hicks was another Black women water warrior whose organizing continues to shape Detroit's organizing community and inspired this research. She also passed away in July 2014. Her legacy was as a Black women water warrior whose activism extends into struggles around food justice, economic justice, and international solidarity work. Her organizing in the Detroit water struggle continues to be pivotal. In one of her last speeches she emboldened

attendees to #wagelove, an approach to organizing that continues to shape the work of Detroit organizers and activists.

Mama Lila and I had what neither one of us knew would be our final meeting together on January 4, 2019. I met with Mama Lila to conduct an assessment of Charity Hick's papers and discuss a plan of action for archiving Charity's papers. In discussing Charity's papers, we both thought it necessary to include the perspectives of other Black women water warriors. These are women who were not only influenced by Charity but have continued to organize against water shutoffs and for access to clean and affordable water. During this meeting Mama Lila provided a list of Black women who she viewed as leaders in the water crisis, and therefore water warriors. This list included the following people: Maureen Taylor, Marian Kramer, Mama Lila, Alice Jennings, Rhonda Anderson, JoAnn Watson, Nayyirah Shariff, Claire McClinton, Monica Lewis-Patrick, Brenda Lawrence, and Charity Hicks. This research documents Black women water warriors' experiences in the water crisis, and in doing so demonstrates that Black women's lived experiences are crucial to our understanding of the Detroit water crisis. Objective data is often valued over the lived experiences of people and the Flint Water Crisis is one example where people's concerns about water quality were ignored until data was produced via the community-initiated water testing. This research situates the lived experiences of Black women water warriors as a source of knowledge, that is equally legitimate and valuable to understanding the Detroit water crisis, as objective data.

Chapter One: Methodology and Literature Review

Methodology

Being responsible and equitable is bigger than a notion, especially if you are afforded any level of resources. It means you have to open yourself up to vulnerability. It means you have to seek input and receive critique. It means you have to be willing to invest in others and trust others to support or enhance your vision. It means you can't let a history plagued by resource extraction and absence drive your ambition. (Facebook Post, Tawana Petty)

Because Detroit is my home, this research is very personal to me. This research exists as an articulation of my political commitments, commitments to my community, and commitment to my scholarship. It is for these reasons that I was struck by this Facebook post made by Tawana Petty, a Detroit organizer, scholar, and activist. I understood her words as a call to action to stay true to my commitments even from afar. Tawana's words have had a direct influence on the shaping of this project including my choice of methodologies. The following section provides a project description and overview and includes information on interviewee selection and project structure. I also discuss my analytical frameworks which includes critical oral history and Black feminist epistemology. I discuss how these two interpretive frameworks assisted me in addressing the research questions in a manner that aligns with the political and intellectual aims of this project.

Oral histories from seven out of the eleven women listed by Mama Lila are included in this research. These women are: Monica Lewis Patrick, Maureen Taylor, Marian Kramer, JoAnn Watson, Claire McClinton, Rhonda Anderson, and Alice Jennings. I collected the oral histories of Claire McClinton and Rhonda Anderson between July 2019 and August 2019. The additional oral histories used were conducted by the Detroit Equity Action Lab (DEAL), as part of their project "Documenting the Grassroots". DEAL's project aims to document grassroots organizing in

Detroit, on issues such as environmental justice, education, racial inequality, and housing justice.[1] For this project I decided to use critical oral history as the method to guide me in the preparation, process, and presentation of the oral histories. Christine Lemley, an education professor and critical oral history practitioner, describes critical oral history as a method that "both writes and rights history, so that participants - both interviewers and narrators - in the critical oral history project aim to contextualize stories and make the voices and perspectives of those who have been historically marginalized heard and listened to."[2] Lemley's definition partners well with the overall aim of his project, to honor Black women water warrior's leadership and to uplift Black women water warrior's perspectives on the Detroit water crisis. Critical oral history and traditional oral history share many similarities in their technical approaches including, methods of recording, preparation practices by the interviewer, and methods of follow up. However, where they differ is critical oral histories' explicit agenda to uplift marginalized narratives, as part of confronting state and corporate narratives that uphold oppressive structures. Critical oral history in many ways discourages neutrality and this was important to consider, because the women interviewed, and the issues they are discussing were not neutral. Shutting off the water for thousands of households in a majority Black city while allowing corporations to hold bills amounting to tens of thousands of dollars illustrates the lack of neutrality with this issue. Profits are valued over people and therefore much of the mainstream narrative that exists surrounding the Detroit Water Crisis is skewed to fortify those values. Critical oral history necessitates reflections on the following questions: Whose

[1] We organized this collaboration because there were many overlaps in who we recognized as leaders in the water crisis and we share a similar agenda of uplifting usually marginal perspectives and voices. One major limitation of my research was time and material resources and the Detroit Equity Action Lab team has been extremely supportive throughout our collaboration in providing me with the technological and research support necessary to conduct my research.

[2] C.K. Lemley *Practicing critical oral history: Connecting school and community.* (Abingdon; Oxon: Routledge, 2018), i.

voices are missing? What perspectives are missing? What am I "righting" about the history? How can this research support the ongoing struggle for water rights? Critical oral history is a necessary method for this project because Black women's expertise has been central to the fight for water rights; and documenting their work and perspectives means an investment in narratives that strengthen our fight for water rights.

E. Patrick Johnson is a Black queer studies scholar, whose scholarship has also been influential to my engagement with and presentation of, Black women water warrior's oral histories in this research. E. Patrick Johnson has conducted research and published multiple books, documenting the lives of Black queer, lesbian, and gay people, using oral history as his main methodology. In *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: An Oral History* (BQSQ) Johnson conducts an oral history of Black, same sex loving women in the south. Johnson views his research as providing a platform for the women "... to speak on their own terms about what it means to be black, southern, and expressive of same-sex desire."[3] In BQSQ he engages with the Black women as active participants theorizing on their own experiences and he does not intend the oral histories to represent an ultimate truth. Johnson states "I am more invested in "what the narrator remembers and values and how . . . she expresses memory" than the validity of the narrative itself. This is why I do not offer an analysis of the narratives, for I want them to stand as quotidian forms of theorizing. "[4] Johnson is more invested in allowing us to see how this one moment in history is remembered by these particular individuals. Similarly, this research is equally committed to the act of remembrance and documentation. This research incorporates Johnson's approach by engaging with Black women water warriors as knowledge experts and depends on their own quotidian

[3] E. Patrick Johnson, *Black. Queer. Southers. Women.: An Oral History,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 5.
[4] E. Patrick Johnson, *Black. Queer. Southers. Women.: An Oral History,* 14.

theorizing to provide the core analysis of this research. While I do incorporate some framing of their oral histories I rely on the women's oral histories to instruct me. In this research I adopt the role as a facilitator of their theorization, by providing framing in the form of themes which draw out commonalities I see while still being heavily dependent on the theorization already provided by Black women water warriors in their oral histories. The framing and analysis I do provide in this research expands on the themes found in their oral histories which articulate a shared approach to water organizing.

The second methodology I utilized in this project is Black feminist epistemology. Black feminist epistemology is a theoretical and methodological framework coined by Patricia Hill Collins; a sociologist known for her work on Black feminism. *Black Feminist Thought* is a foundational text in Black feminism and it's in this text that she coins the concept of a Black feminist epistemology. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins analyzes US Black women's unique positionality at the intersections of race, class, and gender. She describes her experience of feeling ill trained to "study the subjugated knowledge of Black women's standpoint".[5] Collin's response is to construct a Black feminist epistemology which provides a framework to fully engage Black women as agents of knowledge. A Black feminist epistemology is described by Collins as embodying five characteristics: it engages lived experience, uses dialogue to assess knowledge gaps, has an ethics of care and personal accountability, engages Black women as agents of knowledge, and moves towards truth.[6] She uses this methodology throughout her own text to examine topics including the role of controlling images in subjugating Black women, Black women's activism, sexuality, motherhood.

[5] Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 252.
[6] Collins, *Black Feminist Though*t, 252.

I chose to use a Black feminist epistemology because while other feminist standpoints and epistemologies exist, it was important that this project engaged a methodology that was created with Black women in mind. One of the ways that this project has been influenced by Black feminist epistemology is through my engagement with critical oral history. Using a Black feminist epistemology, I engage the Black women water warriors in these oral histories as experts of their lived experiences, knowledge creators, and organic intellectuals in this movement. I also incorporate a Black feminist epistemology in the development of some of my oral history questions. Some of which include: How would you describe your identity? Does your gender and/or race impact how and why you organized around water rights? Who are the Black women in Detroit that have most influenced your organizing? How do you see yourself fitting into a larger tradition of Black women's organizing in Detroit? What was your relationship to Mama Lila? Did your relationship with her have an influence on your organizing? What was your relationship to Charity Hicks? Did your relationship with her have an influence on your organizing? Some of the oral history questions I used were my attempt to acknowledge that their lived experiences as Black women fighting against water shutoffs is also knowledge worth documenting. It is not in spite of their race/gender/class that they have been so strategic in their organizing rather it's their positionality in those categories that has directly influenced their approaches.

Literature Review

In the following section I provide a review of some of the existing literature on the subjects of Black feminism, community archiving, memory studies, Black Detroit history, and a review of the community research project Mapping the Water Crisis. I have chosen to review these topics because these are the fields of research that have directly informed this research, and these are the fields to which this research aims to contribute.

BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT & BLACK WOMEN'S INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Black feminist thought is a core theoretical framework in this research. In *Black Feminist Thought,* a groundbreaking text in Black feminist studies, Collins describes Black feminist thought as a critical social theory. Collins states, "Black feminist thought's identity as a "critical" social theory lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similar groups."[7] Black feminist thought has been utilized in this research to analyze the ways in which Black feminism is present in the organizing traditions used by Black women water warriors. Collins describes Black feminism as "a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community."[8] None of the Black women water warriors explicitly name themselves as feminist or Black feminist. However, the agenda they articulate in their interviews is very much rooted in a humanist vision of community. According to Collins, "To look for Black feminism by searching for U.S. Black women who self-identify as "Black feminists" misses the complexity of how Black feminist practice actually operates."[9] In addition to examining their organizing for its Black feminist influences, this research also presents Black women water warriors as intellectuals, who through their organizing make important contributions to the development of Black feminist thought. Collin's states "Black women intellectuals are neither all academic nor found primarily in the Black middle class. Instead, all U.S. Black women who somehow contribute to Black feminist thought as critical social theory are deemed to be intellectuals."[10] Using Collin's definition of intellectuals this research will engage Black women's water warriors' activism as an embodied form of intellectualism, and will also examine the types of intellectual contributions their activism makes.

Engaging Black women as intellectuals and re-reading their activism and quotidian life experiences as intellectualism, is a new approach being utilized by many historical researchers to

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[7] Hill Collins, Patricia. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 9.
[8] Patricia Hill Collins, "Defining Black Feminist Thought," The Feminist Ezine, accessed April 27, 2020, http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/modern/Defining-Black-Feminist-Thought.html
[9] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 31.
[10] Collins, 14.

examine Black women's social activism. This is an explicit Black feminist intervention in the historiography of Black social activism which often acknowledges Black women for their doing but not their thinking. However, Black women have made substantial contributions to Black intellectualism and have been formative in the development of Black Feminist Thought. The following texts all utilize creative approaches and methods in their study of Black women's intellectual history: *Beyond Respectability by* Brittney Cooper, *How We Get Free by* Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, and *Remaking Black Powe*r by Ashley Farmer. These texts have been looked to as examples on how to engage Black women as intellectuals, given that much of the intellectualism produced by Black women exists outside of the academy. These texts provide insight into new forms of intellectualism that are overlooked because of their non-scholarly origins and also give rise to previously unacknowledged Black feminist schools of thought.

In *Beyond Respectability*, Cooper explores the intellectual thought traditions of Black women from the early 19th century to the Black Power era, she demands that we recognize Black women as equally if not more so, thinkers and intellectuals" as male theorists like Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon. Cooper asks "What might it mean for Black feminist scholars to say they are theorists in the tradition of Anna Julia Cooper, or Fannie Barrier Williams, or Ida B. Wells...in the same way that scholars are allowed to claim that they are Marxist, or Freudian…"[11] In her own research Cooper adopts an Anna Julia Cooperian approach, and demonstrates the opportunities available to us when we use Black women's intellectualism as roadmaps to approaching our scholarship in the study of Black women. This research will adopt Cooper's approach of viewing the activism of the Black women in Detroit as simultaneously producing knowledge and making crucial intellectual interventions, in addition to their own systemic interventions. I will also explore the intellectual genealogies within Black women water organizers activism and its potential to embody a distinct school of thought, which has the potential to shape Detroit's radical organizing traditions.

[11] Cooper, Brittney C. *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. (Urbana; Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 3.

In Remaking Black Power, *Farmer* explores the activism and knowledge produced by post war Black women radicals and Black women in the Black Power era. Farmer demonstrates how formative their intellectual contributions were to the Black Power era and reorients the timeline of the Black Power era from beginning in the 1960s with Stokely Carmichael to postwar radical Black women radicals.[12] This is an important intervention because Black women are not often positioned as a site of origin in intellectual thoughts. Farmer explores Black women's theorizing of gender in the Black Power era, however, Farmer adopts a different approach in which she "destabilizes dominant perspective and archival practices" by relying on intellectual productions created by Black women and allowing them to be authorities on the subject. Farmer uses an expansive definition of intellectual productions that is not limited to written materials. She references, for example, art, music, and other cultural expressions as examples of intellectual productions. Farmer's creative approach to engaging with evidence offers readers new gender constructions from the perspective of Black women from the Black Power era. Farmer's approach to engaging with her sources and reading them for their intellectualism, is similar to the approach I will take in reading the activism of Black women in Detroit for the insight it can offer about gender's influence in the Detroit water crisis.

In *How We Get Free* Taylor unpacks the ideologies of the Combahee River Collective and places it as foundational to the development of radical Black feminism. To accomplish this Taylor uses the Combahee River Collective statement, an essay, and oral histories she conducted with writers of the statement Barabara Smith, Beverly Smith, Demita Frazier, and BLM founder Alicia Garza. Using this evidence Taylor is able to unearth the often overlooked socialist roots of the Combahee River Collective and place the collective as knowledge producers whose intellectual contributions continue to shape contemporary intellectual thought and organizing today, especially in the field of Black feminism. It is clear that Taylor's own socialist politics and identity as an

[12] Farmer, Ashley D. *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 13.

activist-scholar influenced the evidence, methodology, and presentation of her research. By relying solely on the lived experiences of Black women as retold by Black women and writings produced by Black women - Taylor allows the Black women in her research to hold agency and be authoritative speakers over their intellectual productions. This research will incorporate Taylor's by making space for Black women to speak authoritatively on their own experiences, without a cosign of theorists. Black women water warriors are the theorists. Finally, as a continuation of Black Feminist Thought which requires scholarship be for the sake of aiding in people's liberation; this research intends to be a tool to encourage people to engage with ongoing organizing work for water rights in Detroit.

COMMUNITY ARCHIVING AND MEMORY WORK

One of the aspirations of this research is that it will be a catalyst for a community archive focusing on preserving radical Black grassroots in organizing in Detroit. Community archiving is one alternative that is often implemented by communities, who for a multitude of reasons believe it is necessary for them to maintain stewardship over their own materials versus placing them in a traditional archive. The motivation for working towards creating a community archive that focuses on the topic of radical Black grassroots organizing is an opportunity to invest in a community owned and operated method of archiving and sharing histories that have been in direct opposition to the violence and oppression facilitated by the state.

A community archive is not only an opportunity for radical Black grassroots organizers to experiment with creating a system of archiving and sharing histories attuned to their political commitments and larger visions of a world, but it allows community members to have those visions and commitments honored and prioritized throughout the process. For this reason, the topics of community archiving and memory studies have been used to think through the type of framework that would be best utilized for this future radical Black grassroots community archive. It has also been useful to imagining a Black queer feminist archival praxis, what the characteristics of this praxis could be, and how it could be a tool for conducting preservation and storytelling

work in the future. In the following section I will provide an overview of literature related to community archiving and memory studies and their influence on this research.

An archive is an institution responsible for the preservation of records and historical materials that are marked as valuable and necessary to the community it serves. Archives wield tangible and symbolic power, and influence over societal narratives that shape cultural formations and institutional structures. The power and influence are largely leveraged through choices being made by archivists about what to include and exclude, descriptions of the materials, and access opportunities. The archival profession, not unlike any other profession or school of thought whose origins are primarily located amongst Eurocentric thinkers, have practices and structures that perpetuate harm and uphold systems of oppression. Traditional or formal archives, responsible for preserving and safekeeping societal records, have a history and ongoing issue of erasing, excluding, and misrepresenting marginalized communities.[13] Michelle Caswell, an archival professional and researcher, uses the term "symbolic annihilation," which was adapted from its origins in media studies, to describe the effects on marginalized communities experiencing the erasure and misrepresentation of their communities in the archives. Caswell states, "To be symbolically annihilated is to be an eternal outsider whose very existence is presumed an impossibility. In the wake of this absence, marginalized communities fail to see themselves or their places in the world."[14] Black Detroiters are being symbolically annihilated. Black women water organizers organizing for access to clean and affordable water are constantly confronting a system whose existence depends on Black Detroiters not existing. Symbolic annihilation in Black Detroit has shown up in the form of erasing Black people from the so called "Detroit Comeback" in order to obtain private control over land and public services. Part of this erasure includes using racist tropes to misrepresent Black Detroiters as incapable of governing themselves. In experiencing this

[13] Formal, traditional, institutional, and mainstream are all terms typically used to describe archives, embedded in major societal institutions like university archives and government archives and who adhere closely to the principles of the archival profession.

[14] Michelle Caswell, Maria Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, "To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives," *The American Archivist* vol 7, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2016), 58.

phenomenon personally as a third generation Black Detroiter, it was evident--to paraphrase Audre Lorde--that I could not use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.[15]

In 2007, Andrew Flinn, an archival professional and researcher known for his foundational research on community archives; defined community archives as the "... grassroots activities of documenting, recording and exploring community heritage in which community participation, control and ownership of the project is essential."[16] Flinn's definition serves as an important grounding on the topic of community archives. In recent years as conversations around structural power and archives have advanced, archival scholars like Michelle Caswell have been able to introduce greater complexity and depth into our understanding of the function and flex of community archives. In 2016 Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez state, "community archives can be seen as a form of political protest-an attempt to seize the means by which history is written and to correct or amend dominant stories about the past."[17] Caswell's definition mirrors what has emerged in the Black Lives Matter Movement which is that the strategy of self-documentation has played a crucial part in confronting capitalist white supremacist structural powers. This strategy did not originate in the Black Lives Matter Movement, but it is a hallmark of the movement. Technology has also made self-documentation a more accessible way for everyday people to engage in archival work. One example is *A People's Archive of Police Violence* which is an "online archive to collect, preserve, and provide access to the stories, memories, and accounts of police violence as experienced or observed by Cleveland citizens."[18] It was created by Cleveland residents and archivists from around the country and gives users the opportunity to upload personal testimonies, photos, videos, and other digital media that contributes to the documentation of police violence. The purpose tab of the site details the factors and events that made the creation of this

[15] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," In Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches, (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 110-114.
[16] Andrew Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (2007): 164.
[17] Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, "To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives, 62.
[18] "About," A People's Archive of Police Violence, accessed January 25, 2020, https://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/

site necessary, the first of which was the high number of police deaths in 2015 and the second factor was the continued acquittal of police officers despite video and other evidence demonstrating discrepancies in the police's sequence of events. A People's Archive of Police Violence serves as an example of the importance of documentation as a strategy against oppression and state violence in the Black Lives Matter Movement, and how it permeated the archival field. My project positions itself within this tradition and aims to seize the means by taking back the narrative of the water crisis by centering and honoring the organizing and intellectual contributions being made by Black women water warriors in Detroit.

Jarrett Drake, a self-described "archivist nihilist" and also one of the archivists helping to facilitate the creation of "A People's Archive of Police Violence" stated, "Reformation of oppressive institutions — be they prisons, police, or archives — only yields more mature manifestations of oppression. Trying to reform, rather than damage, oppressive structures is like washing a wound with salt water. Relief may come momentarily but pain will come certainly."[19] This abolitionist sentiment is one that I personally share and also see as a guiding principle of this project. Abolition requires a commitment beyond deconstruction, it requires radical future oriented building. Embracing liberatory archival imaginaries as part of my framework in this project allows me to sharpen my orientation towards Black liberation and my investment in creating new systems that embrace Black people. Caswell states, "Liberatory archival imaginaries place the work of uncovering what happened in the past in service of building socially just futures."[20] Liberatory archival imaginaries is not a destination but similar to abolition, it's a practice and an aspiration. Caswell states, "by uncovering previously untold, ignored, or misinterpreted histories communities can imagine and reimagine different trajectories for the future."[21] This project will

[19]Jarrett M. Drake, "Liberatory Archives: Toward Belonging and Believing (Part One)," Keynote delivered at UCLA on October 21, 2016, accessed January 25, 2020, https://medium.com/on-archivy/liberatory-archives-towards-belonging-and-believing-part-1-d26aaeb0edd1

[20]Michelle Caswell. "Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives." In *Identity Palimpsests Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada,* ed. Dominique Daniel and Amalia S. Levi, (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2014), 51.

[21]Caswell, "Inventing New Archival Imaginaries," 49.

amplify Black women's contributions to confronting structural powers as well as their contributions to shaping Black Detroit radical organizing. Finally, by starting with and centering Black women's organizing in the narrative of the Detroit water crisis this project aims to unapologetically assert Black women water warriors as a starting place when discussing the Detroit water crisis.

The title of this research is "Mapping Our Memories in the Water" because an initial draw of this project, in addition to wanting to commemorate Charity Hicks, was also an interest in the sacred status of war beyond its survival use. Water cleanses, destroys, heals, quenches, grows, and so many other functions. With this belief in mind I view the attack on water as a spiritual attack, a belief shared by some of the Black women water warriors interviewed. With the loss of water comes the loss of community, and the eventual loss of community memory. Water is life giving and life sustaining and limiting access and reducing quality is an attack on the lives of those citizens who cannot afford water; many of whom are poor, working class and Black Detroiters. This research operates on the belief that just like water, memory is life giving and life sustaining.

Memory studies have been used in this project to think through the impact of community archiving on collective memory formation. Collective memory is a concept coined by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and is described by W. James Booth as "the varied forms in which a community is tied to its past. It involves, among other things, the storing up of the interpretative work of previous generations as part of the self-understanding of the community."[22] This project aims to highlight a counter-narrative in the water crisis with the intent of pushing back against state narratives which seek to uphold oppressive structures and to support the preservation of radical Black grassroots organizing in Detroit. These narratives can only be sustained with a recognition of their value and purposeful investment in their documentation, as well as community engagement. These memories directly contest the types of narratives being conjured by corporate and state powers which either deny the existence of the water crisis or utilize classist, sexist, and

[22] W. James Booth, *Communities of memory: on witness, identity, and justice*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 21.

racist tropes to justify the denial of access to water for those who are unable to pay. The positioning of these narratives, as a counter to state and corporate sponsored narratives, is the exact reason it is not given the same sort of investment into its preservation as those narratives which uphold systems of oppression. Ashis Nandy, a social theorist and psychologist states, "Formal preservation of memory has often little to do with the survival of a culture and the people whose memory it commemorates."[23] I embraced memory as a framework in this research because the documentation of these oral histories was done with the belief that the survival of these narratives also ensures the survival of resistance to these systems. Community archives and oral history in this research were engaged as methods to carry out this alternative model of preservation, memory work. According to cultural historian Annette Kuhn, memory work is a method or practice of unearthing and making public untold stories, stories of lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretive devices of the culture don't quite work.[24] The bureaucratic structure of traditional archives is not known to engage with the value of archival materials for the sacred or even spiritual nature of its contents. The intentional memorialization of Charity Hicks and Mama Lila speaks to the needs of the community for preservation processes to also be able to engage with the sacredness of what it means to preserve these memories. In this research I argue that Black women's narratives of their experience organizing in water justice are the types of borderland narratives that require methods beyond those afforded in traditional archival processes. To conclude, Nandy states in the same lecture that, "One hopes that the study of memory work will not merely lead us to build grand archives and museums of memories, but also prompts us to grant dignity to communities that live by memory-dependent knowledge systems, art forms and life support systems and force us to revise intellectual projects that systematically ignore the entire range of apparently modest, disposable, memory banks of the marginalized and the forgotten."[25] This research was done with a similar hope, that the result of this would not be the placement of

[23] Ashis Nandy, "Memory Work," Inter-Asia Cultural Studies 16, 4 (2015): 600.
[24] Kuhn, Annette. *Family secrets: acts of memory and imagination.* (London: Verson, 2002): 9.
[25] Nandy, "Memory Work," 602.

these histories in a grand archive or museum but that it will be engaged as an investment into the survival of the community.

BLACK DETROIT HISTORY

Popular narratives about Detroit often pinpoint its "decline" starting with the 1967 riots and blame its continued "decline" on the failures of Black leadership. While these popular narratives continue to thrive, historical research about the structural powers which intentionally disinvested from Detroit, and other rust-belt cities like it, has advanced. Historian Thomas Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis* is an entry point into Detroit history. It offers an analysis and historical retelling of the racist structural origins of the Detroit urban crisis. Through exposing the racist structural origins of Detroit's decline, Sugrue counters research and public opinion that blame the conditions in Detroit on character flaws of poor Black people. In the text, he conducts a case study of Detroit and exposes the federal and state policy, corporate capitalist endeavors, and white spatial racism that worked to limit Black people's mobility and inevitably led to a decline of the city infrastructure.[26] Sugrue argues that the source of Detroit's urban crisis is "...that capitalism generates economic inequality and that African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of that inequality."[27]

My research is informed by Sugrue's argument concerning capitalism's impact on Black Detroit and I aim to make a similar intervention in this research by presenting a counter-narrative that further illustrates the influence of capitalism in Detroit's water crisis. In addition, by centering a new perspective and therefore a new narrative about the Detroit water crisis, I aim to counter the narratives which tell us the condition of Detroit is due to the negligence of poor Black people. An example of this is a 2014 commentary on the Detroit water crisis by Nolan Finley, a Detroit news columnist known for his conservative opinions, it has since been removed but is still cited by other

[26] Thomas Sugrue, "Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit," (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.
[27] Sugrue, " Origins of the Urban Crisis," 5.

conservative news platforms, like the Washington Free Beacon. In this article Finley states,

> ...barely 50 percent of Detroiters pay their water bill. Meanwhile, up to two-thirds of city residents pay to keep their cable or satellite television service current. And 72 percent do the same to maintain their cellphones...So instead of using what resources they have to cover their needs, many water customers instead have chosen to service their wants. That's what happens when people are conditioned to think someone else is responsible for taking care of them.[28]

This is a common narrative used to explain away the water crisis by blaming it on poor people's inability to properly manage funds instead of the unaffordability of water in Detroit for most of its residents, whose median income is $29,481.[29]

Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis* makes many interventions in our historical analysis of the capitalist forces that led to an urban crisis in Detroit. Yet, while it mentions some of the resistance efforts of those times, it does not offer us a thorough history of the organizing that was occurring in response to these forces. *Now is the Time! Detroit Black Politics and Grassroots Activism*, Todd C. Shaw provides the critical analysis of the strategies used by grassroots organizers in Detroit following the Civil Rights era. Shaw uses the Effective Black Activism Model (EBAM), a model with roots in theory of political opportunity structure (POS),to analyze the strategy used by grassroots activists to hold public officials accountable and advocate for the needs of poor people in Detroit.[30] Shaw uses a case study method and the EBAM model to examine how grassroots activists made decisions about their timing, use of tactics, and relationship building in historical campaigns and political moments.

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[28] "Explainer: If you don't pay your bills you don't get stuff," The Washington Free Beacon, accessed January 27, 2019, https://freebeacon.com/blog/explainer-if-you-dont-pay-your-bills-you-dont-get-stuff/

[29] "Detroit, MI Quickfacts," United States Census Bureau, accessed January 27, 2020, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/detroitcitymichigan,MI/PST045218

[30] Todd C. Shaw, *Now is the Time! Detroit Black Politics and Grassroots Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 18.

When describing the frameworks that influenced the development of his research, Shaw notes the influence of Black feminism. He utilizes concepts like intersectionality and multiple consciousness during his examinations of the role of collective identity in grassroots activism. Shaw states, "...gender implicitly matters within grassroots politics, for a great majority of the Detroit struggles I studied were led by Black women, reflecting a broader trend. Gender as experienced by women is an indispensable part of their multiple identity and standpoint."[31] Shaw aims to explore, "How can race, class, gender, and regime impede the opportunities for effective grassroots activism?"[32] This text does not have an explicit focus on Black women's leadership in grassroots activism in Detroit, however there are some moments throughout the text where Shaw highlights the role of Black women and their leadership in these historic organizing moments. Shaw draws attention to an important connection between Black women's over representation as heads of household and their heavy engagement in anti-poverty activism and public housing advocacy. He states, "Inflamed by passions for racial, gender, and economic justice, many Black women activists made a linkage between antipoverty and affordable-housing activism."[33] Indeed in my own study it is clear that the genesis of water organizing is rooted in housing and welfare rights organizing that was already occurring. Marian Kramer and Maureen Taylor both worked for the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization when they began their water organizing in the late 1990s. My research will further illuminate these connections and the organizing that was occurring which was influenced by an intersectional analysis of the systems of oppression which engaged race, class, and gender. I argue that this is indicative of a radical Black feminist approach to organizing.

[31] Shaw, *Now is the Time!*, 6.
[32] Shaw, *Now is the Time!*, 5.
[33] Shaw, *Now is the Time!*, 55.

Sugrue and Shaw share a similar orientation that includes a strong racial and class analysis. While Sugrue does not explicitly engage with gender or grassroots activism, Shaw's text touches it only briefly. For example, Shaw discusses how issues like public housing and welfare rights are issues where Black women's activism has been critical. He discusses how a group of Black women formed a group called Brewster-Douglas Tenants Get the Short End of the Stick, which advocated for the preservation of the Brewster public housing complex. This omission does not allow us to get a clear understanding of their leadership and engagement in organizing, nor their insight into how their organizing experience differed because of their identities as Black women.

It is impossible to conduct historical research in Detroit without engaging with the multitude of Black histories which have shaped the culture and identity of this city. Black Detroit history, however, is usually told in fragmented stories as part of a larger subject of focus. *Black Detroit* presents for the first-time what Herb Boyd describes as a "long view" history of Black people's experiences and contributions to Detroit from their first documented arrival to the mid twenty first century.[34] Boyd tells the history of Black Detroit through personal life antidotes, interviews from community members, stories collected from community griots, and archival research. Using these sources Boyd tells an extensive story of firsts for Black people in Detroit, i.e. the first Black teacher in Detroit. In doing so, Boyd provides a new perspective to historical events which centers Black people experience.

Black Detroit is groundbreaking work in many ways. It builds on the work of Shaw in *Now is the Time!* by extending the time coverage of Detroit history from 2008 to 2015 and provides an explicitly Black-oriented retelling of these moments. Sugrue's work presents a structural argument for Detroit's decline and Shaw analyzes and presents a history of grassroots organizing. Boyd's

[34] Herb Boyd, Black Detroit: A people's history of self determination (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15.

approach is strongly rooted in providing a history of Black Detroit and is not necessarily an analysis of the state of the city. Boyd legitimizes the experiences of everyday Black people's memories as source material for documenting Detroit history. Centering Black women,Boyd uses important events in his mother's life as another entry into Black people's experience in Detroit. The memories of Katherine Brown, who is Boyd's mother, is used as a continuous thread throughout the text which gives us insight into a Black woman's experience during important historical events in Detroit. For example, when Boyd discusses the 1943 Detroit riots he also includes his mother's memories of going out and joining the crowds during the events and eventually walking away with "a Virginia ham and a can of Swift's chitterlings."[35] In addition to using his mother's memories as a source and including Black women in documenting the firsts of Black people in Detroit, Boyd also has moments in the text where he highlights gender constraints and conflicts. For instance, in his telling of the contributions of the League of Revolutionary Workers he highlights an organizational issue of "blatant male chauvinism and attacks on women," he even includes a mention of a rape committed by one of the founders.[36] Boyd's willingness to include these events in documenting the legacies and histories of Black people in Detroit is an important intervention in presenting whole and complex histories. It is an important intervention because these types of stories are often erased for the sake of maintaining an image of homogenous unity within the Black community.

Victoria Wolcott's text *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit,* is an important addition to the historiography of Black Detroit because her historical research addresses Black women and gender in Detroit, a subject that is noted but not commonly

[35] Boyd, *Black Detroit*, 151.
[36] Boyd, *Black Detroit*, 219.

a central focus. In *Remaking Respectability,* Wolcott documents and analyzes Black women in interwar Detroit with a specific focus on how they leveraged respectability as a tactic to counter racist stereotypes and work towards racial uplift. *Remaking Respectability* addresses gaps in the documentation of Black women which exists in much of the historical research conducted about Detroit. Wolcott states, "The dominant narrative of black Detroit has focused on male industrial employment and struggles for civil rights, relegating black women to a secondary role in the development of an African American community...Black women challenged the virulent racism that relegated their families to the worst housing and lowest-paying jobs…"[37] Wolcott made sure that the Black women included in her research were not just middle class racial uplift club women. She also sought source material that would allow her to reconstruct pieces of the quotidian life experiences of working-class Black women. She achieves this by seeking out materials that don't fall in the traditional category of written records. To do this Walcott used "...blueswomen's lyrics, accounts of numbers running, and ethnographies of storefront churches…"[38] Wolcott's creative use of source material to accommodate for the gaps in documentation is one example of an important Black feminist intervention she is making in Black Detroit's historiography. Utilizing non-written works and other materials that exist beyond the archive is a necessary approach to including narratives and experiences that are left out because of the lack of access to written records or their assumed worthiness of documentation. An additional intervention Wolcott makes is the placement of Black women as an entry point into examining cultural and class dynamics within the Black community. Wolcott makes a point that Detroit is often understudied when it comes to cultural histories and when it is a point of focus Black women's contributions and

[37] Victoria Wolcott, "*Remaking Respectability, African American Women in Interwar Detroit*" (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 10.
[38] Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 3.

experience are placed in the peripheral. *Remaking Respectability* redresses this gap in history and proves gender to be a necessary and underutilized lens through which we engage in historical analysis.

My project aims to contribute to the historiography of Black Detroit history by building on the works of Sugrue, Shaw, Boyd, and Wolcott; through retelling the events of the Detroit water crisis using Black women leader's oral histories as the primary source. While it is not intended to make an explicit structural analysis in the same way as Sugrue, my research is influenced by Sugrue's position on capitalism's inherent negative impact on Black people. The documentation of the Detroit water crisis has the potential to present a tale of events that further illustrates the ongoing consequences of capitalism which continues to put Black people at a disadvantage. This research is influenced by Shaw and Boyd's work on documenting the grassroots organizing and experiences of everyday Black citizens, which are often overlooked in the literature. This research contributes to building the historiography of Black Detroit history through its focus on retelling a story of the Detroit Water Crisis centering the experiences of Black women organizers. Wolcott's work is important to this research because she presented an approach to engage in historical research, where gender in addition to race and class are the central lens. Gender is a central analysis in this research and Wolcott's work shows what's possible when gender is fully engaged and placed in the center of history.

MAPPING THE WATER CRISIS: THE DISMANTLING OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN NEIGHBORHOODS IN DETROIT

In 2016, We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective published *Mapping the Water Crisis: The Dismantling of African American Neighborhoods in Detroit. Mapping the Water Crisis* is one volume in a three part series which documents "the social consequences of austerity

policies and emergency management in Detroit, focusing in particular on the racial inequality of these policies"[39] as it relates to water, land, and education. The We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective is made up of activists, academics, researchers, and designers producing participatory community research for the citizens of Detroit. *Mapping the Water Crisis* is a community led counter-narrative project which dispels mainstream narratives about the Detroit water crisis that demonize the poor and blame the water crisis solely on failed Black leadership in Detroit. According to the We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective, "The research itself is part of a larger project, led by We the People of Detroit, which includes a city wide community survey, a citizen-science project to test water quality, and individual and collective narratives."[40] Mapping the Water Crisis is just one example of the community research they have created since their inception.

Mapping the Water Crisis provides a wealth of information, which includes historical context on emergency management in Detroit, a history of political tensions surrounding the regionalization of water, and a timeline of the water struggle in Detroit. In addition, *Mapping the Water Crisis* used data gathered via FOIA requests and census data to map water shutoffs and visually illustrate the racial inequities present in water shutoff policies in Southeast Michigan. *Mapping the Water Crisis* has been important to this research because in addition to providing an example of the counter-narrative work being spearheaded by Black women water warriors, it also provides foundational information about the methods used by corporate and state powers which permitted the eventual takeover of the Detroit water department and the management of water

[39] We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective, *Mapping the Water Crisis: The Dismantling of African-American Neighborhoods in Detroit*, Vol. 1. United States: We the People of Detroit, 2016, 1.
[40] We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective, *Mapping the Water Crisis: The Dismantling of African-American Neighborhoods in Detroit*, 1.

service. These are powers who donot recognize water as a human right and who continue to place profit above human lives.

Below is a breakdown of the methods used by corporate and powers to take over Detroit, as explained in Mapping the Water Crisis:

- Disempowerment of the majority African American electorate and their elected Mayor and City council members through the imposition of a governor-appointed Emergency Manager accountable only to the governor.
- Privatization of city social service agencies and radical reduction in social welfare resources for the poor.
- Disorganization of the system, wrecking of facilities and outsourcing of the assets of the Detroit Public Schools by a series of dictatorial, incompetent, corrupt Emergency Managers
- Intervention of private foundations, and appointed commissions to assume policy and decision-making roles, circumventing the authority of elected officials and government agencies
- Campaigns by foundations to undermine engaged, visionary cultural production in an arts community that one produced some of the nation's most powerful creators through distribution of grants and awards of artwork supportive of the political status quo.
- Unrelenting mass media campaign to convince the public of the failure of African American civic leadership, urging popular complicity with undemocratic, illegal practices.[41]

In many ways *Mapping the Water Crisis* builds on Thomas Sugrue's analysis that capitalism breeds inequality which disproportionately impacts African American. However, *Mapping the Water Crisis* speaks more pointedly about specific ways that capitalism has violated poor and working-class Black Detroiters at the hands of corporate and state powers which place profits above people. The We the People Collective Research team offers an analysis that speaks directly to the systemic origins of the water crisis impact, and it is an analysis that heavily informs this research.

[41] We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective, v.

Chapter Two: Conversations from the Frontline

This chapter provides a list of the Black women warriors as recited by Detroit organizer Mama Lila, followed by short profiles on the Black women whose oral histories inform this research. This is followed by an exploration of four core themes found in the oral histories as demonstrated in four historical moments in the Detroit water crisis: (a) radical Black feminism: discovery of mass water shutoffs that discusses the influence of radical Black feminism in the formations of the water struggle, (b) memory is sacred: Charity Hicks #wage love speech section which explains the value of memory in Black women water warrior's organizing, (c) narrative is power: Lydia et.al water case section describes the mainstream narratives that exist in the water crisis as well as the counter-narrative work being led by Black women water warriors, finally the (d) local, regional, and global solidarity in the Flint water crisis section details the multi-level solidarity work and internationalist politic embodied by many Black women water warriors. These are themes found in their oral histories which I will argue encompasses a distinct intellectual tradition that has been developed in the water crisis amongst the leadership of Black women water warriors.

WATER WARRIOR PROFILES

Mama Lila's list has been an important hallmark of this project and I have been inspired by Black feminist theorist Dr. Brittney Cooper to engage with this list as evidence of a genealogy of Black women's leadership in organizing against the Detroit water crisis. Cooper describes how listing has been used as a strategy by African American women to resist intellectual erasure. On a similar note this research aims to strategically deploy this list as a tool to resist the erasure of their organizing labor which has been crucial to the fight for water rights in Detroit and beyond. Cooper states, "...African American women created lists of prominent, qualified Black women for public consumption. These lists situate Black women within a long lineage of prior women who have done similar kinds of work, and naming those women grants intellectual, political, and/or cultural

legitimacy to the Black women speaking their names."[42] Listing has been a useful practice in this project by presenting another entry into incorporating the stories of Black women who have since passed but whose work continues to shape organizing in Detroit and beyond. I engage with this list as a source and look at their relationships to other Black women organizers on this list who are still alive to speak to their role in and impact on organizing against the Detroit water crisis. This list embodies more than a documentation of lineage of Black women's leadership. It also provides a catalog for how we might access grassroots knowledge of the Detroit water crisis since an archival collection that document's this struggle does not and might not ever exist.

The following profiles are of Black women water warriors that Mama Lila presented to me in the authentic order as written by her. Not all of the Black women water warriors listed by Mama Lila have contributed oral histories to this research. However, it is important that all these women be acknowledged. My hope/intent is that all these Black women's stories will be included/incorporated in future research.

Mama Lila

Mama Lila was a lifelong Detroiter who expressed her love for the city through her commitment to justice for all. In one lifetime Mama Lila was a civil rights activist, water warrior, and racial justice advocate. She was a good friend of Rosa Parks and President Emeritus of the Raymond and Rosa Parks Institute. As President Emeritus Mama Lila was a strong advocate for making sure that Rosa Parks' legacy continued to be remembered and celebrated. Mama Lila was a cofounder of the Detroit People's Platform and the People's Water Board. As a cofounder of the People's Water Board Mama Lila helped to create Detroit's first Water Affordability Plan in 2005. Mama Lila was a known advocate for racial justice, and she offered many workshops and trainings that have had an immeasurable impact on the development of Detroit's grassroots leadership.

[42] Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana; Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 26.

Charity Hicks

Born and raised on the lower east side of Detroit, Charity Hicks was a Detroit water warrior known for her call to organizers to 'Wage Love' in our struggles against oppressive systems. Charity was a founding member of the Detroit People's Water Board, a member of the Detroit Food Justice Task Force, and a Policy Director at East Michigan Environmental Action Council. Charity's organizing work was focused primarily on environmental and food justice campaigns, but she has also been involved in organizing around racial and economic issues. Global engagement was central to Charity's organizing and she used her global lens to expose the connections between the Detroit water crisis and other nations experiencing state sanctioned water crisis'. Charity hosted environmental organizers from Haiti and Brazil who came to connect with local Detroit urban farmers, and she built relationships with organizers from Brazil's MST Landless Peoples Movement. Her organizing legacy extends well beyond the borders of the US and in her passing, there were many correspondences from international organizers celebrating her life and her contributions to the struggle. She was instrumental in influencing organizers' relationship to water; and like Mama Lila she was known for encouraging organizers not to use plastic water bottles, as part of divesting from stolen and privatized water sources. Charity Hicks' was known as a mentor to many and her organizing brought people into the water struggle; including Alice Jennings who credits Charity as being the person who influenced her to be more actively involved in the water struggle. Charity Hicks is often referred to as 'the Rosa Parks of the water crisis' continues to shape organizing in the water struggle even after her passing.

Alice Jennings

Alice Jennings is a lifelong Detroiter and influential civil rights lawyer who has used her knowledge of the law to help move forward many social justice struggles in Detroit. She is a graduate of Wayne State University Law class of 1978 and credits her choice to become an attorney to seeing Barbara Jordan on television calling for the impeachment of Nixon. This coupled with her experiences of witnessing her father participate in union organizing in Detroit also shaped her

interest in civil rights law. She has been practicing law since the 1980s and has served as an attorney for many cases that have brought us closer to a more equitable Detroit. In 2014, Alice Jennings was an attorney in the Lydia et. al v. Detroit case where she represented customers of the DWSD (Detroit Water and Sewage Department) and victims of water shutoffs. She argued that the city of Detroit's water shutoffs were unconstitutional and put forth a motion for there to be a moratorium on all water shutoffs. The case was ruled over by Judge Rhodes who ruled in the favor of the city of Detroit and argued that water is not a human right. Alice Jennings continues to be a vocal advocate for water rights in Detroit and she has been a leader in the recent calls for water services to be renewed and for the state of Michigan to mandate affordable water. Alice Jennings' work has placed her in relationship with almost all the women on this list as a Black women water warrior who leverages her legal knowledge to the benefit of Black working-class Detroiters.

Claire McClinton

Born and raised in Flint, Michigan Claire is a leader and organizer in the Flint Water Crisis. She is a General Motors retiree with an extensive organizing record. Much of her experience is in union organizing and over her lifetime she has been a member of the United Auto Workers and the League of Black Revolutionary Workers in Detroit. Claire McClinton cites her experiences in union organizing as a major influence on her organizing practice. Claire is also a founding member and leader of the Flint Democracy Defense League, a grassroots organization which grew out of a campaign to end the emergency management law and became a leading advocacy group in the Flint Water Crisis.

Rhonda Anderson

Rhonda Anderson is a long time Detroiter and environmental justice organizer who grew up in River Rouge, Michigan. She is an environmental justice organizer with almost 30 years of organizing experiences and has been an organizer with the Sierra Club for 20 years. As an organizer with the Sierra Club she oversaw the Sierra Club Detroit chapter and she currently holds

the position as the Regional Organizing Manager. The Sierra Club is a national environmental justice organization, where membership is predominantly white. Rhonda has been steadfast and committed to making sure that the environmental justice issues in Detroit, a majority Black city, are acknowledged and prioritized. She has worked campaigns on issues of incinerator pollution, toxic wastewater pollution, and illegal dumping. In addition to her environmental justice organizing with the Sierra Club ,"Mama Rhonda," as she is affectionately called, has also been a part of labor organizing with SEIU, a community organizer with Warren/Conner Development Association, and an environmental justice organizer with Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice. Mama Rhonda is also the mother of Siwatu-Salama Ra, an environmental justice organizer and former political prisoner who was liberated through community organizing. Mama Rhonda has a legacy of organizing to defend communities against polluters and she stands shoulder to shoulder with Black women water warriors.

Nayyirah Shariff

Nayyirah Shariff is a Flint-based grassroots community organizer and activist. They were raised in Flint, Michigan and have been doing organizing work for over ten years. Nayyirah went to school for engineering but when Flint was placed under emergency management in 2011 it sparked a career shift into organizing They initially became involved through their work with Planned Parenthood, as well as through outreach and petitioning work to oppose emergency management statewide. Nayyirah has continued to organize on a national, state, and local scale with much of their organizing work focused on the Flint Water Crisis struggle. Nayyirah has been a core leader and organizer advocating on behalf of the community residents, who worked to bring the Flint Water Crisis to a national and international stage. Nayyirah is a co-founder of the Flint Democracy Defense League, which is a prominent organization in the Flint Water Crisis struggle. Currently, they are director of Flint Rising which is a "a coalition of Flint residents and community

groups, labor, and progressive allies that formed in response to Flint's emergency declaration."[43] Flint still does not have clean water and Nayyirah continues to be a crucial organizer and water warrior, in the fight for Flint residents to get clean water and reparations for the harm caused to them via water poisoning.

Brenda Lawrence

Born and raised in Detroit, Brenda Lawrence is the U.S. Representative for Michigan's 14th district. She began her career in government working at the United States Postal Service. She worked there for over 30 years. Congresswoman Lawrence's first elected position was to the Southfield School Board, the school district that her own children attended. She also became a Southfield city council member in the early 1990s, and in 1999 was elected president of Southfield City Council. In 2001 Congresswoman Lawrence became the first Black and female mayor of Southfield, Michigan, and was president of the Southfield City Council until 2015. In 2014 she was elected to represent the 14th district of Michigan in the House of Representatives. In her time as a U.S. Representative, she was an early advocate of federal intervention in the Flint Water Crisis. Today she is a sponsor of the Water Affordability, Transparency, Equity and Reliability (Water) Act, which provides over a billion dollars to improve the water infrastructure of cities all over the country. Congresswoman Lawrence has been a consistent advocate for water affordability and improved water infrastructure. She has also pushed legislation to end emergency management and continues to advance legislation that places people above profits. Congresswoman Brenda Lawrence has leveraged her political powers and influence as a national political representative to bring the Detroit and Flint Water crisis, as well as other water crises across the country, to a national agenda.

[43] "Nayyirah Shariff," DC Environmental Film Festival, Accessed July 27, 2020, https://dceff.org/filmmaker/shariff-nayyirah/

JoAnn Watson

Born and raised in Detroit, the Honorable Reverend Dr. JoAnn Watson is a Black women water warrior and a core figure in the struggle for water rights. She is known for her decades long organizing, which has roots in the civil rights movement. Rev. Dr. JoAnn Watson has organized around economic justice issues, water affordability issues, and racial justice. She served as a Detroit council member from 2003 to 2013, and she sponsored the Water Affordability Plan which legislated income-based water rates and the end to water shutoffs. Rev. Dr. JoAnn Watson credits civil rights icon Rosa Parks and Erma Henderson, the first Black woman Detroit city council member and president, as the people who mentored her and encouraged her to run for a city council seat. During her time in city council she also mentored many organizers, including Black women water warriors Monica Lewis-Patrick and Debra Taylor. Rev. Dr. JoAnn Watson has been recognized as a national leader in the fight for reparations and served as chair of the Detroit chapter of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America. She has also been active in the international organizing community and built relationships with leaders in Venezuela and Cuba to create opportunities for skill sharing and community building. Currently, Rev. Dr. JoAnn Watson hosts a radio show called "Wake Up Detroit!" and a television show called "Wake up World!". She views these shows as an organizing tool which she uses to uplift human rights and political issuesRev. Dr. JoAnn Watson continues to be vocal in the fight to end water shutoffs and to make water affordable in Detroit. Her organizing has been invaluable to the water struggle and her contributions have shaped Detroit's Black radical organizing legacy.

Monica Lewis Patrick

Monica Lewis-Patrick is a cofounder and CEO of We the People Detroit. We the People Detroit was founded in 2009 by Monica Lewis-Patrick, Debra Taylor, Cecily McClellen, Aurora Harris, and Phyllis (Chris) Griffith. A "community-based grassroots organization, WPD aims to inform, educate, and empower Detroit residents on imperative issues surrounding civil rights, land,

water, education, and the democratic process."[44] In 2014, We the People of Detroit began a water crisis hotline for people who needed support when their water was shut off and who needed financial assistance with their water bills. Monica Lewis-Patrick began as a Director of Community Outreach Coordinator at We the People Detroit in 2009 and later served as CEO. She is a member of the Peoples Water Board where she has supported coalition building in support of the Detroit Water Crisis. Monica co-authored a book in 2016 titled, "Mapping the Water Crisis: The Dismantling of African-American Neighborhoods in Detroit," which documents the racial and economic inequality present in water shutoffs and the price of water. Monica Lewis-Patrick credits JoAnn Watson as one of the people who served as a mentor during her time as an organizer during the Detroit Water Crisis. It was her time working in the office of the Honorable JoAnn Watson where she was able to witness social justice-oriented values in practice. Monica Lewis-Patrick continues to be a Black women water warrior who champions the rights of poor and working-class Detroiters.

Marian Kramer

Marian Kramer is a long-time organizer, with over 50 years of organizing experience. She has experience as an organizer in the civil rights movement, union organizing, and welfare rights organizing which has been the primary focus for much of her organizing history. Beginning with her civil rights organizing, Marian was a lead organizer for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). She also spent time learning the workings of union organizing through her experience as a member of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. Marian is largely known for the work she did as president of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization and as a co-chair of the National Welfare Rights Union. In these positions she spent time defending people wrongly accused of welfare fraud, advocating for the rights of welfare recipients, and working to implement policy changes that put people over profits. Marian is a member of the People's Water Board, and a co-

[44] "Who We Are," We the People of Detroit, Accessed July 27, 2020, https://www.wethepeopleofdetroit.com/who-we-are

creator of the Water Affordability Plan in 2005. She is a practitioner of Johnnie Tillmon's praxis, including Tillmon's critique of racial capitalism and patriarchy as it is modeled in the mistreatment of welfare recipients. In collaboration with Maureen Taylor and others she organized around the Highland Park Water Crisis by organizing to stop water shutoffs and by holding elected officials accountable to implement a water affordability plan. Marian Kramer is a Black women water warrior who continues to be active today as she continues to advocate for an end to water shutoffs and legislation which would make water affordable for everyone.

Maureen Taylor

Maureen Taylor is an organizer who started organizing at age of five when she watched her family come together to organize for her grandfather's safe escape from Port Allen, Louisiana. She notes that it was a cross-country trip where she saw the mass exploitation of working-class people of all races around the country. This trip fueled her desire to do something. Maureen has been an organizer for over 30 years, time which she has spent organizing and advocating for the rights of poor and working-class people in Detroit. She is a social worker by training and has served as a chair of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization since 1993, where she's helped families negotiate with metro Detroit area agencies for access to needed money and resources. She is a practitioner of Johnnie Tillmon's organizing praxis, that those most impacted should be the ones leading the way in developing solutions for issues in their community. Maureen was a leader in the water struggle in Highland Park, and in partnership with Marian Kramer, she helped to document the experiences of those whose water was shut off, worked to stop water shutoffs, and to implement a water affordability plan. She has collaborated with Marian Kramer for much of her organizing career and Marian is one of the people she credits with getting her involved in the water struggle and other organizing initiatives. Maureen was a co-creator of the Water Affordability Plan that was put forth to Detroit city council for a vote in 2005 and she continues to be a vocal organizer in the water struggle in Detroit and beyond.

Radical Black Feminist Organizing: Discovery of Mass Water Shutoffs (late 1990s - 2000)

Maybe it is we poor welfare women who will really liberate women in this country. We've already started on our welfare plan. - Johnnie Tillmon (1975)

Detroit is a union town and known for its historic labor organizing. Despite the white histories that dominate popular narratives of labor organizing, Detroit has a history of radical Black labor and working class organizing. Groups like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) are known for their communist, Black nationalist, and internationalist organizing.[45]These organizations served as radical conduits for the development of communist and Black-centered intellectual thought and organizing. For this reason, I expected that the Black women I interviewed would hold Detroit's history of labor organizing as a central influence on their work, and this was true.

The historical moment in which Black women water warriors became aware of mass water shutoffs offer insight into the influence of a radical Black feminist organizing praxis. Using the oral histories of Marian Kramer and Maureen Taylor, as a guide I will explore Black women water warriors beginnings in what would become a decades long struggle for water rights. From the moment they learned about mass water shutoffs, the interconnectedness of welfare rights to water shutoffs has been an important thread in this work Key also is the legacy of Johnnie Tillmon whose work continues to inform an organizing model in use today. From their voices and oral histories, the theme, "Radical Black Feminist Organizing" became evident.

The interconnectedness of the water struggle on a local, national, and global level means that to even begin the story of the Detroit water crisis we must look to Highland Park, Michigan. Highland Park, Michigan is a three-square mile city located within the city limits of Detroit, Michigan. Highland Park started off as a place of production for the Ford Motor company and eventually transitioned to a fully independent municipal government. Currently, it has a population

[45] Duncan Tarr, "50 Years Since Detroit's Dodge Revolutionary Movement," African American Intellectual History Society, accessed March 30, 2020. https://www.aaihs.org/50-years-since-detroits-dodge-revolutionary-union-movement/

of about 11,000 people and is 90 percent Black with a median income of $15,699.[46] Highland Park and Detroit share a similar experience of automotive industries interests being intrinsically tied into and prioritized in city management decisions. However, Highland Park's origins as the birthplace of Model T cars and the "birthplace of mass production" makes it such that it had been especially impacted by deindustrialization and the decline of the auto industry. The decline of the auto industry's presence in cities like Highland Park, Detroit, and Flint and other urban working-class cities in Michigan correlated with an increase in financial instability and vulnerability. As previously discussed, Thomas Sugrue notes that capitalism breeds inequality and African America's bear the brunt of that inequality. Highland Park was one of the first municipalities in Michigan to experience emergency management[47] and in many ways it served as a canary in the coal mine, showing the lengths that state powers would go to gain power over resources like water. The state frames emergency management as a necessary intervention to assist in the functions of local cities and municipalities. However, in function emergency management has been weaponized as a way to accelerate development, seize assets, and exclude local officials from decision making. The impact of this has been the weakening and limiting of people's power to advocate for their interests and be represented in decision making. The following oral history provides evidence and support for this notion.

MARIAN KRAMER[48]

The Michigan Welfare Rights Organization is a core organization in the water struggle and has been present in the struggle since the beginning. Marian Kramer and Maureen Taylor were both leaders in the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization at the start of their organizing in their

[46] Data USA, Highland Park, Michigan City Profile, accessed March 30, 2020. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/highland-park-mi/

[47] Emergency management is a process by which the state of Michigan appoints an emergency manager who has full decision-making power over the operations of the city. In the 1990s under Public Act 72 it was limited to cities that the state determined to be under financial distress and the functions were limited to financial powers. In 2012 Public Act 436 was passed which allowed for the expansion of the powers of the emergency financial manager into an emergency manager whose powers extended beyond financial issues and into general city governance.

[48] Marian Kramer, interview by Peter Blackmer, August 27, 2019, transcript, Voices from the Grassroots, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Detroit, MI.

water struggle. Marian Kramer looks back on her start in organizing in the water struggle which begins with the Highland Park Water Crisis. She describes the linkages between the water struggle and struggle for welfare rights, as both issues disproportionately impacted poor and working-class people, especially poor Black women. She shares her memories with us.

PB: So, let's pick up with how and when Michigan Welfare Rights got involved in the water struggle in Highland Park.

MK: Okay. We started out in the water situation in 1990s, and it was because someone had mentioned to me in, in Highland Park that they, they had cut their water off. And I said, well, wait a minute, let me go up here and see the mayor [Linsey Porter]. And he told--he said, "Marian, we have whole lists of people that we are forced to cut off." I said, "No. No one will force you if you take a stand for the benefit of the people. Don't cut that water off." And this was during the holidays at the time, and it was cold as hell out there. I said, "We need a place to have a meeting."--telling Linsey Porter--he just passed away, too--because not only are we having problems, we're beginning to have problems in Highland Park. Then, people in Detroit began to call us with some of the same problem. Their water was being shut off. And I was telling Maureen [Taylor] at that time, "Look, if we check deeper, you'll find out…"--Well, they were coming in the office saying they had utility problems. And I said, "If we, if we check a little deeper, you will find out they got more problems than just utilities, and one of them is the question of water. And we're gonna have to dig that out of them because they tend to not say anything because they're afraid that their children will be snatched." So, that's when we, you know, at that, that was the beginning stages of this water fight.

MAUREEN TAYLOR[49]

In the following oral history excerpt Maureen Taylor recollects how she was introduced to water organizing, and how it was sparked by her relationship to Marian Kramer and General Baker. In this excerpt Maureen demonstrates the role of relationships as something which initiated her water organizing; this section also illustrates how she engaged her water rights organizing as a continuation of the work she was already doing around welfare rights.

> **MT:** Again, it was that devilish Marian Kramer. Here we are in Highland Park [Michigan], and the mayor of Highland Park--he just passed away a few weeks ago. His name was Linsey Porter.--and Marian and Gen[eral Baker], her late husband, very close friends with Linsey Porter, and he, Linsey, contacted Marian and said something about water shutoffs in Highland Park, and Marian, she's telling me about it. He wants us to go to his office. We go to his office, and he gives us a list, and it's stapled and it's three or four or five pages with addresses on it. We say, "Linsey, what's this?" He said, "Well, these are the names of people--not the names, but the addresses of folks who have either had water shut off or about to be shut off." And I looked. It might have been 600-700 names and I said, "That can't be right." So, Marian said, "Well, let's go over there."
>
> So, we get in the car and we started driving up and down streets. So, it might be 10 Glendale. Next to that is 12 Glendale. Next to that is 14 Glendale, then 16 Glendale, and everybody knows us, so we're knocking on the door. "And is it true that you all are having water shutoffs in this property?" "Yeah, yeah. Don't tell anybody. We don't have water. We haven't had water in two or three weeks." And we're going in and out and up and down the different blocks. And so Marian jumped right on it, "We have to do something." We started organizing in Highland Park, getting people to come out. We had to talk to the Water Department in Highland Park and get with the mayor and everybody else. So, it started there.

[49] Maureen Taylor, interview by Peter Blackmer, August 25, 2019, transcript, Voices from the Grassroots, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Detroit, MI.

Water access is an issue that continues to persist in Highland Park and as late as 2015 residents shared stories of receiving monthly water bills that were over $1000. In 2014, Highland Park was again determined to be under financial distress, the second time in less than five years, which resulted in the appointment of another emergency manager. There were two key reasons cited: the cost of retiree's' pensions and the city's inability to collect water payments. City leadership and residents cite the dissolution of Highland Parks' water and sewage department as the genesis of the manufactured water crisis. After the dissolution of the Highland Park water department, a decision made by an appointed emergency manager, Highland Park switched to the Detroit Water and Sewage department. The result was that residents continued to receive inconsistent and irregular water bills for years. The state's solution was to collect these inconsistent payments from residents rather than eliminating debt and making the water affordable. Highland Park's fight against water shutoffs began years earlier than Detroit but many of these events occurred simultaneously. Around the same time that Maureen Taylor and Marian Kramer became aware of the water shutoffs occurring in Highland Park water rates were increasing in Detroit. And Detroit's position as an epicenter in the water crisis and its connection to cities across Michigan that had also fallen victim to a state manufactured water crisis became undeniable.

Both Maureen Taylor and Marian Kramer cite Johnnie Tillmon's method of organizing as one that has influenced their approach to organizing both in the water crisis and in their work around welfare rights more broadly. Johnnie Tillmon (1926-1995) was a welfare rights activist born in Arkansas who founded Aid to Needy Children [ADC] in 1963 and was the executive director of the National Welfare Rights organization from 1972-1975.[50] Tillmon understood the race, class and gender implications of the welfare state and brought attention to the way in which welfare was weaponized and used to control and surveil poor working-class communities. In her article, "Welfare as a Women's Issue", Tillmon states, "The man, the welfare system, controls your money. He tells you what to buy, what not to buy, where to buy it, and how much things cost.

[50]Laura Tanenbaum, "This Day in Feminist History: Johnnie Tillmon," *Dissent Magazine,* November 27, 2015, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/this-day-in-feminist-history-johnnie-tillmon-nwro

If things-----rent, for instance----really cost more than he says they do, it's just too bad for you."[51] In her article Tillmon used the metaphor of the man to illustrate the commonalities of the patriarchal men the feminist movement opposed with current functioning of the welfare system. Johnnie Tillmon believed that it is through the leadership of poor welfare women that the liberated world we aim to create will indeed be won. To sum up, Tillmon's organizing philosophy in her own words "Maybe it is we poor welfare women who will really liberate women in this country. We've already started on our welfare plan."[52] This is an organizing philosophy which incorporates a radical Black feminist analysis that continues to influence the organizing of Maureen Taylor, Marian Kramer, and other Black women water warriors.

MAUREEN TAYLOR[53]

Maureen Taylor provides a summation of how she understands Johnnie Tillmon' organizing philosophy, as well as how it relates and differs from other organizing philosophies like Saul Alinsky's. She also briefly describes her training in this philosophy and how it has continued to influence her organizing approach which is grounded in the belief that as an organizer she should be supporting the development of those impacted to be able to advocate on their own behalf.

> **MT:** Johnnie Tillmon's methodology was about getting the victims of poverty trained and clear about the politics, about the politics and the foundations of poverty, and that Johnnie Tillmon believed that if you show and explain to low-income people, that class of folks, what the real totality is of the, of a crisis situation, they are able to explain and to advocate on their own behalf. And that's different from the Saul Alinsky group and whatnot that says, you know, let's get the intellectuals together and they will be the best spokespersons for what's going on in this class. And that's nothin--that's not bad, but it's just different.

[51] Johnnie Tillmon, "Welfare is a Women's Issue," *Ms. Magazine*, 1972, https://www.bitchmedia.org/sites/default/files/documents/tillmon_welfare.pdf
[52] Tillmon, "Welfare is a Women's Issue"
[53] Maureen Taylor, interview by Peter Blackmer, August 25, 2019, transcript, Voices from the Grassroots, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Detroit, MI.

> So Johnnie Tillmon brought that concept that the victims of poverty are the best advocates and supporters and spokespersons for their own conditions and that's the way I was trained and I was trained very good in that…[54]

Water affordably might not initially be framed as a gender issue or a race issue but organizing models like Tillmon require an acknowledgment of the gendered and racialized experiences of capitalism. Water access is a necessary household function. You need water to clean, bathe, eat, drink, and truly to survive. Shutting off access to water is a direct rupture to the function of a household. Welfare rights is an organizing issue that disproportionately impacts poor Black women and women of color. As my research shows, it is significant that Kramer and Taylor became aware of water shutoffs through their organizing for welfare rights. Tillmon frames welfare access as a basic right; as something that anyone should be able to access regardless of race, gender, or class identities. However, it is through centering the experiences and supporting the leadership of poor Black women and women of color who are disproportionately impacted that we can create a system that doesn't hoard resources. It is not merely that people are unable to afford water and the state refuses to create pathways for affordable water access. It is also that the state uses racialized and gendered narratives , including old tropes that poor people are financially irresponsible and lazy, to explain away its negligence. This is a perspective that shares many commonalities with narratives created to demonize people on welfare, Black women in particular.

Many of the women argued that class solidarity is important to their organizing. However, it was clear that throughout their stories that there was also an embedded analysis on the impact of race, class, and gender. They demonstrate in their stories that solidarity does not require the flattening of other identities like race and gender and doing so is a detriment to our liberation. It is not only possible but necessary to recognize the wholeness of people's experiences in order to create the liberated world we deserve. None of the women interviewed identified themselves as

[54]Maureen Taylor, interview by Peter Blackmer, August 25, 2019, transcript, Voices from the Grassroots, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Detroit, MI.

Black feminists or named such theoretical approaches in their practices. However, it is evident in their organizing approaches that there is an integration of tactics and ideologies embodied in radical Black feminist organizations and organizers such as the Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis, Ella Baker, and Johnnie Tillmon. In summary, Black women water warriors commitment to seeing the multilayered impact of the water crisis, sparked an organizing response that from the start recognized the importance of addressing the water crisis as an intersectional issue which deserved an intersectional response.

Memory is Sacred: Charity Hicks arrest and "Wage Love" speech July 2014

Charity Hicks was a freedom fighter who taught us how to fight! Say what?! And we gon' fight all day and night until we get it right! What side are you on my people? What side are you on? We on the freedom side! - a movement chant, origin unknown

The "Memory is Sacred: Charity Hicks arrests and Wage Love" speech July 2014, is derived from the experiences and impacts of Charity Hick's influence. Many have sat under her leadership, and her legendary call to wage love has come to be known as a directive and commitment to the work she and other community members have engaged in. There are multiple Black women water warriors who attribute their work and contributions to the voice and inspiration of Charity Hicks. In spite of efforts to suppress the stories of people's resistance, the stories that Black women water warriors share about ancestors like Mama Lila and Charity Hicks serves as a way of continuing their legacy and creates opportunities for intergenerational understandings which "...are not only important to faith and religion but are imperative to how black women see themselves in and how they navigate this world."[55] This section includes oral histories from Monica Lewis-Patrick, Rhonda Anderson, and Alice Jennings who reflect on the #wagelove speech and the memories of Charity Hicks.

Charity Hicks was a legendary Black women water warrior whose legacy is deeply admired and respected in Detroit and far beyond. Charity Hicks is now a beloved ancestor and even in the

[55] LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, 128.

afterlife, she continues to be influential in the fight for water rights. She was active in organizing on issues such as food insecurity, water affordability, women's rights, gentrification, racial justice, and a slew of other issues. In addition to her organizing accomplishments she was a researcher, writer, poet, wife, and sister. Charity was known for her sharp analysis and organizing insights which were deeply valued.

Today at the mention of Charity Hicks what usually follows is a proclamation to "wage love". Charity Hicks uttered this phrase in a speech she gave after her release from jail, she was arrested earlier that day for stopping the Homrich company from shutting off her pregnant neighbor's water. 'Wage love', as I understand it, is a call to keep at the core of our organizing a collective investment to build care practices in our community. To "wage love" means that one's organizing is grounded in a love for humanity and the strategies used require confrontation against these systems of oppression, but also a collective investment in building loving care practices in community. This is one example of how Charity Hicks' knowledge and organizing traditions continue to shape water rights organizing today. In addition to providing a counter-narrative of the Detroit water crisis, these oral histories provide insight into the role of memory in Black women water warriors organizing. It was Charity Hick's passing and the remembrance practices that followed which led me to this project. Remembrance of ancestors like Charity Hicks and Mama Lila play an important role in shaping community memory and therefore community identity in Detroit's radical Black grassroots organizing community. In the face of oppressive systems which erase and misrepresent such community histories, the communal memorialization practices performed by the community itself become especially important.

Elizabeth J. West is a Black feminist scholar whose work explores topics related to gender and spirituality. West wrote a piece entitled "Memory, Ancestors, and Activism/Resistance in Charles Chesnutt's Uncle Julius" in which she analyzes historical Black texts such as the Conjure Woman, Beloved, and Roots to discuss the central role of ancestors in Black people's activism and resistance. In this article, West states,

Storytelling is an experience of collective remembering, and as the community remembers, the ancestors are honored, solidarity is reaffirmed, and the speakers, as well as hearers, are reminded of the community's beliefs and values."[56] In addition to honoring their legacy, remembering the legacies of Black women water warriors like Charity Hicks and Mama Lila is formative to community identity and serves the role of strengthening community connections with those who are living and those who are deceased. West states, "Remembering, that is, the memory act, affirms the individual's understanding of self as inexplicably tied to the group or community. Through memory, individual and social place and responsibilities are ordered, and the connection between carnal and spiritual worlds is preserved.[57]

The following oral histories offer testimonials of Charity's impact on their personal organizing and the overall struggle for water rights, as well as the ways Black women water warriors continue to integrate the insights of Black women even as they transition into ancestorship.

MONICA LEWIS PATRICK[58]

In the following oral history excerpt Monica Lewis Patrick describes the night that Charity Hicks delivered her final speech #wagelove to a crowd at the St. Peter's Episcopal Church following her release from being arrested for trying to stop her neighbors water from being shut off.

> **PK:** And that's coming to the front of my mind and it makes me also want to ask were you there that night when Mama Charity brought up wage love as it appears.
>
> **MLP:** I was actually invited into the private space that she was brought to before she addressed the crowd. And so I was sitting in the room with she and Bill Wylie Kellermen Councilmember Watson and I remember you know anybody knows Charity--Charity was that woman that you think of when you think of Harriett Tubman you know a very strong physically enduring presence you know mixed with a side of Maya Angelou kind of vernacular but then at the same time to then flow into maybe more of like a Queen Latifah

[56]Elizabeth J. West, "Memory, Ancestors, and Activism/Resistance in Charles Chesnutt's Uncle Julius," *Studies in the Literary Imagination,* 43, no. 2 (2010): 38.
[57] West, 38.
[58] Monica Lewis-Patrick, interview by Oriana Yilma and Peter Kramer, May 24, 2019, transcript, Voices from the Grassroots, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Detroit, MI. 1.

kind of rap moment and then take you to this very high intellectual of maybe like a you know a Dr. Gloria House. And to have that combination of somebody or somebody that kind of human fluidity that was just to masterful at navigating whatever situation. [Monica pause] To go from that kind of power and then to see her soul physically shaking scared me to death. And to sit and watch councilmember Watson console and caress her and tell her it was going to be alright as she told us about the condition she was in the condition she was in--in this what she called the pit and the bullpit and how she talked about this corralling of Black female bodies and how these women were in all kinds of conditions of you know disease and pregnancies and some were on their menstrual cycles and didn't have anything to care for themselves. You got one facility to use for what she described was about a hundred women in these conditions and she was in these conditions for about 48 hours. And talking about different medical needs and mental illnesses and all of this playing out in this cage that she's in and at the same time her foot is cut. And she can't get any medical treatment and she's a diabetic so it puts her at even a greater risk. But it reminded me if you've ever seen those movies that are sort of these reenactments of slavery where the Black mother is standing and she's watching her children be ripped from her arms and sold into slavery and you feel like this pain but it doesn't start here it starts here that's what it was like watching Charity because I had never seen Charity in a weak moment. I seen her at funerals I seen her at protest we been in all kind of community fights never ever saw a weak moment. And to see her almost appear to be something broken. [Monica pause] was an unforgettable experience and then to see her be able to gather herself after you know Pastor Bill talking with her and councilmember counselling and praying with her to then to see her gather herself with enough courage to then go out and address the community knowing how concerned and frightened they were and having to muster up and I mean you saw her physically just totally transformed. And present this very courageous and powerful and loving telling of the story of trauma and then compelling and demanding from that room to wage love. [Monica pause] We had no idea that we wouldn't see her again [Monica

pause] but I often tell people that story of Charity because I want people to remember that sometimes that revolutionaries die in these struggles. And the work that Charity did is not in vain. [Monica pause] Because those of us that understand that she made the ultimate sacrifice and that was to be able to make sure that Detroiters were respected on a national level in terms of their resistance and fight here and making sure that the country knew clearly that what had happened to Detroit was not of their own making and design that it had been a manufactured narrative a contrived bankrupting a seizing of power to destroy a people that deserve to be free and so I always want to make sure that work that we do is acknowledged as being an extension of the work that she has done.

As West notes, "A story is not simply a distant conveyance between an orator and an audience; rather, it is an experience, a reliving of events, a revisiting of people long gone."[59] In her oral history Monica Lewis Patrick discusses the power of remembering, as something that has the potential to ground and galvanize people. She explicitly acknowledges how she places her organizing work in relationship to the intentional counter-narrative work Charity engaged in to challenge national mainstream narratives which demonized poor and working-class Detroit residents as well as Black city leadership in Detroit. Monica Lewis-Patrick's oral history explains the value and use of remembrance practices as a part of Black women water warriors organizing approach. She shows that investment in community memory is necessary in the fight to confront mainstream narratives, which aims to justify the violence poor working-class Black communities are forced to endure for the sake of profits. Below is another example from the oral histories that discusses and demonstrates the value of memory.

RHONDA ANDERSON[60]

Rhonda Anderson describes the impact of Charity Hicks' and Mama Lila's legacy on the Detroit organizing community as well as the devastation that came with their passing. In this

[59] West, "Memory, Ancestors, and Activism/Resistance in Charles Chesnutt's Uncle Julius," 38.

[60] Rhonda Anderson, interview by Marcia Ashley Black and Peter Kramer, August 13, 2019, transcript, Voices from the Grassroots, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Detroit, MI.

section she describes the multiple organizing legacies of Black women who have offered their leadership in the service of the people. Mama Rhonda's remembrance of Charity Hicks and Mama Lila's activism is not only an important part of keeping their legacies alive, but she also does the important work of placing them amongst the legacies of other historic Black radical political figures in Detroit.

MB: Can you talk a little bit more about that and also the type of organizing you've done, or the type of organizing you've witnessed…

RA: Mmhm.

MB: ...around water shutoffs?

RA: So...so the baddest of the bad, I'm talking about these women.

MB: Mmhm.

RA: I'm talking about Monica Lewis-Patrick, Charity Hicks, Lila, okay. Lila and...and Charity. Let me just kind of say that when we lose activists like Charity and Lila, we lose so much. We lose backbone, we lose skill, we lose talent, we lose experience, we lose love that...that they poured all over this city. We lose activists that risked their own lives to deal with horrible situations. Like Charity, you know, who in her defending of a neighbor who was having her--their water shut off, and Charity stepped in and...and said no and was attacked by the police or whoever these people were that were shutting off the water, who subsequently had to go to a detention center, and she was in that jail for, I'm not exactly sure how long, but however long it was, it was long enough for her to become injured, okay. And then, following that--because she didn't stop. She did not stop defending the water shutoffs, you know. And ultimately, after going to New York to attend a water conference, a conference on water, was killed, you know. And like, suspicious, you know.

Lila Cabbil. Lila Cabbil. Lila was working with the People's Water Board, you know, and she worked very closely with Charity, okay. They...they were like best friends and...and they worked together, you know. So when we lose activists like that, that's an injury that sometimes we can't recover from. It leaves a void, like it would leave in

anyone's life, you know, if someone very close to you passed, you know. But when you pass in...when we have activists that pass in the larger community like that, then we're all impacted by it because that's--we need everyone. Okay.

ALICE JENNINGS[61]

In the following oral history excerpt, Alice Jennings describes her introduction to the fight for water rights which was sparked following the legal aid she provided to Charity Hicks following her arrest. Alice shares her memories of Mama Lila and Charity Hicks and the ways that their legacies continue to shape her organizing as she fights for water rights. Alice Jennings oral history further illustrates the power memory has to draw people into organizing and ground community in the legacies of those whose organizing continues to be influential in the water struggle.

OY: ...can you explain just how you first got involved with the water struggle?

AJ: Well, that's a story. [laughs] I first got involved in the water struggle because Charity Hicks, a known water warrior, was arrested, right, in 2014 when they start to--Homrich started doing the first water shutoffs, and they were moving into neighborhoods as if it was a military conquest, and these trucks were literally getting out, the folks were jumping off the trucks, shutting water one house, jumping off the truck, shutting water off the next house, so that whole neighborhoods were not..no longer living with clean, safe, affordable water. So Charity Hicks came out of her house, saw that her pregnant neighbor was about to get her water shut off, ran out, and said, "Don't shut off the water." She then goes in the house and calls the police, police come, arrest her, and take her to jail.

So Lila Cabbil calls me--that's why I said this is a story. I have a lot of old lawyer stories. I can't help it.--[laughs] So Lila calls me and says--Saturday morning, right. I'm having my first cup of coffee--"You've got to come down to the jail because Charity Hicks has been arrested." And I'm like, "I don't do criminal law. I don't know the first thing

[61] Alice Jennings, interview by Oriana Yilma and Peter Blackmer, May 17, 2019, transcript, Voices from the Grassroots, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Detroit, MI.

about doing criminal law, Lila. What am I gonna do?" So, I said, "Call John Royal," and I gave her a couple more criminal lawyers. So, she called him. John was someplace, and--but John said, "Tell Lila go on over there and then we'll figure out what we're gonna do." So, I get there and I go in and I go in and see Charity, who...She's barefoot. Her foot had been cut. She was medically out of control with her diabetes, and she's...and she's sitting there and she's saying, "And we need to do something about the conditions in there!" She's worried about everybody else, I'm worried about her!

And, long story short, we sprung her from jail that day, and that's how I got to meet Charity Hicks and we became fast buddies. And about a month later, she went to New York for a conference, and she was hit by a car and was killed. Yeah. That's the Charity Hicks, water warrior extraordinaire. So, that's how I got involved because it was to honor her memory, and even though I only knew her for about two months, we were very close in that time, that spirit and time that we came together, and I have fought very hard for water. And because it's just the right thing for a human being to do if you care about other people.

The Black women water warriors above shared their stories of Charity Hicks and Mama Lila; and in doing so demonstrated the crucialness of collective memory in their organizing for water rights. LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, a scholar activist who focuses on topics related to womanism/black feminism and religious studies describes "conjure knowledge" as "...the aspect of black women's wisdom traditions that is most comparable to faith knowledge because of its emphasis on belief, but is distinct because that belief is not connected to a divinity. Rather it is expressly tied to an inner voice, intuition, or inner power that draws directly from ancestors, ancestral traditions, and ancestral powers."[62] Conjure knowledge in this case has taken the form of ancestor reverence and community remembrance as a crucial and sacred part of their organizing. Manigualt-Bryant states "conjure knowledge, or the reliance upon folkways that explicitly draw

[62] LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, ""I Had a Praying Grandmother": Religion, Prophetic Witness, and Black Women's Herstories," In *New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition*, edited by Blain Keisha N., Cameron Christopher, and Farmer Ashley D., (Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2018), 125.

from ancestral traditions, experiences, and narratives and, as such, explicitly counter Western practices of rationality, knowledge…"[63] The organizing done by Charity Hicks in addition to embodying an intellectual tradition and Black radical organizing tradition also exists as an ancestral tradition.

The wage love informed organizing that continues to happen in the name of Charity Hicks, is an ancestral tradition that Black women water warriors have made central to the fight for water rights. Their insistence on remembering the works of other Black women water warriors is as much a commitment to opposing counter-narratives as it is about investing in sustaining a community identity that is grounded in the radical organizing led by Black women. White states that "...remembrances serve to maintain the connection between the living and the dead—a connection that is central to the health and survival of the community."[64] And the remembrances of Black women water warriors are absolutely central to the health and survival of Black Detroit.

Narrative is Power: Lyda et al. vs. City of Detroit Lawsuit (2014)

Racism looks like the ability to create a master narrative of failed Black leadership and then explain away stealing pensions… - Monica Lewis-Patrick

Water is not a human right. - Judge Rhodes

Lyda et. al is a landmark case in the Detroit Water Crisis, which played a significant role in solidifying and legitimizing the mainstream narrative that poor people do not have water rights. This case serves as an example of state and corporate powers' investment in leveraging harmful narratives and using courts to legalize a culture that values profit over people. And still Black women water warriors have engaged in counter-narrative work from the genesis of their organizing. Thus far it's come in the form of community surveys, community led research, water testing, data collection and mapping, community centered journalism, global speaking tours, and

[63] LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, 125.
[64] West., 36.

a water hotline to name a few. The actions taken by Black women water warriors, and state and corporate powers, tell us that narrative is power, and whoever controls the narrative holds the power. This section will also discuss the organizing which occurred in the Flint Water Crisis, specifically the work water warriors did to break the media blackout. The Flint Water Crisis occurred because of the decision by a state appointed emergency manager to switch from Detroit's water supply. This was done by state powers as part of its long-term plan to privatize and regionalize Detroit's water system. The connections and similarities between the two crises, and the overlapping counter-narrative work done by organizers, made it necessary to include the Flint Water Crisis in this section. In this section I discuss Charity Hicks, Alice Jennings, Monica Lewis-Patrick, and Claire McClinton's oral histories, and explore the strategic leveraging of narratives to solidify power in the water crisis.

The mainstream narratives that surround the Detroit water crisis range from a condemnation of the people whose water is shut off, to a belief that humans are not entitled to access to a life sustaining resource like water. These narratives continue to point the blame for the water crisis on poor Black and Brown communities' financial mismanagement, a commonly cycled narrative which is also used to explain why emergency management of Detroit was necessary. However, the stories of those impacted illustrate patterns of state-mandated systematic failures which encourage unaffordable and unequal water access. These are narratives that impact people's lived reality and access to water, that shape understandings of the Detroit water crisis, and that enable people in power to continue to put profits over people. State-facilitated mainstream narratives which deny that people are entitled to clean and safe water are a direct threat to humanity; and poor working-class Black and brown communities bear the brunt.

In the Lyda et.al case, ten Detroit families sued the city of Detroit using the argument that the shutoffs violate constitutional rights to due process and equal protection, and they sought a moratorium on water shutoffs and the implementation of a water affordability plan. The case was overseen by Judge Rhodes, a bankruptcy judge who declared that water is not a human right and

that Detroit could not afford to lose revenue in the middle of bankruptcy. Below is a detailed explanation of the case by Sharmila L. Murthy, an environmental justice scholar:

> In 2014, residents challenged these residential shutoffs through an adversary complaint, Lyda et al. v. City of Detroit et al., in the then-ongoing Detroit bankruptcy proceedings. The bankruptcy court dismissed the complaint, which sought a six-month moratorium on the shutoffs, the restoration of water service, as well as an order requiring that DWSD implement an affordability plan. The court held that it lacked authority under the Bankruptcy Code to issue an injunction and that, even if it had such authority, the claims did not survive a motion to dismiss. Despite finding that the residents would suffer harm without access to water, the court rejected a host of arguments on the merits, including due process and equal protection claims. As part of its rationale, the court held that "there is no constitutional or fundamental right either to affordable water service or to an affordable payment plan for account arrearages.[65]

Black women water warriors have intervened in mainstream narratives about the Detroit Water Crisis, by creating a counter narrative which brings attention to the inequities that exist in Detroit's ability to ensure equal access to clean and affordable water. The counter-narrative work that Black women water warriors do requires intra and inter community engagement. People who have had their water shutoff are often led to believe that their inability to pay is something that they should be ashamed of and makes them deserving of neglect by their local government. In response, some Black women water warriors have utilized storytelling as a core strategy in their organizing. They have used this strategy to create spaces for those impacted to debunk myths that say they are deserving of this treatment, and to uplift their stories which illustrate the systemic origins of the Detroit water crisis.

Below: Charity Hicks, Alice Jennings, Monica Lewis-Patrick, and Claire McClinton share their experiences confronting state facilitated mainstream narratives as well as the work they've done to create counter-narratives which are more reflective of the experiences of those impacted.

[65] Sharmila L. Murthy, "A New Constitutive Commitment to Water," Boston College Journal of Law and Science vo1. 36, issue 2 (2016): 160-161.

CHARITY HICKS[66]

In the following interview, Charity Hicks described the narratives being promoted in the media regarding the source of the water crisis. She specifically discussed one popular narrative regarding water shutoffs in Detroit: that people don't pay their water bills because they are financially irresponsible, and therefore water shutoffs are justified. Charity highlighted the disconnect in what is represented in the media versus the reality of what actually occurs. She discussed how she observed and was able to provide proof that the city of Detroit allowed corporations to have delinquent water bills but had been relentless in their targeting of poor working-class Detroiters who are unable to pay because of financial struggles and high-water rates, not because of financial responsibility. Charity also highlighted the material impacts of narratives which deflect attention from the core of the issue which is that government leadership at all levels have a pattern of placing profits over people.

> **CH**: So WDIV and all the local media has been talking about who's paying their water bill and who's not. And whoever leaked that, it was an excellent leak. We need to know. We've been asking the Detroit Water Board, who is paying their bill and who's not.
>
> The same week that they are announcing massive shut-offs, the same week that they are announcing that they are hiring extra contractors to come and turn off people's water, why don't they go and turn off water at Joe Lewis arena while they're in play-offs. Why don't they go to Palmer Park Golf Course, who has a $300,000 water bill, turn off Palmer Park Golf Course's water. Turn off all of these real estate mega companies that hold all of these – turn off the banks' water. They need to turn off the Bank of America's water. Instead of the people who cannot even eke out and meet up the cost of living. This is shocking. That's why we held that protest: it's inordinate, it's overreach. We are subsidizing corporate billionaires. And then we don't have any respect – the Water Board, Latimer, [Durham,] all of them, they have zero respect for the people. Zero. Go cutoff the water on the billionaire. Cut off Matty Moroun's water. Cut off Roger Penske's water.

[66] Kate Levy, "Charity Hicks," filmed 2014. Vimeo video, 1:29:42. https://vimeo.com/97235613

They are not paying their bills. They're not. Who racks up an $80,000 water bill. Who racks up a $310,000 water bill, who does that. But you shut me off because I owe $100.

Our action was really meant to bring awareness, critical awareness to the community that some of us are paying at a very high cost and some of us are not paying and are parasitic on poor people and on marginalized people.

But when the News and the Free Press, the local media, print and broadcast, tell the story, they are not really framing it in reality. Framing it like we're criminals, and we're freeloading and framing the corporate people like they're Jesus, like it's the savior that's come and give them all everything. It's embarrassing. It's embarrassing to be in this community where our public officials criminalize the public and show up as corporate hirelings. It's disrespectful our public space, our mayor, our city council, should affirm the people. The dignity of the people, the standing, agency and voice of the people and call our corporate citizens into a greater degree of responsibility. Because these corporate people get tax abatements through renaissance zones, brownfield tax credits and all of these credits. They are not contributing to 911, to EMS, to ambulance, to police cars, they're not contributing, they're not. So when Detroit's service is challenged it's because we get multi-billionaires who we're subsidizing and they're not contributing.

ALICE JENNINGS[67]

Alice Jennings discusses her experience as a lead attorney in the Lyda et.al vs. city of Detroit case. In sharing her experiences, she offers insight into the types of narratives that were shared during the case proceedings, as well as the contradicting response by Judge Rhodes. Alice also describes the impact of the Lyda et. al case and the United Nations visit which followed the Rhodes ruling. Alice's oral history highlights the variety of narratives that were at work in the Lyda et. al case and the power that Rhode's ruling had on the larger stage of the global water crisis. She

[67] Alice Jennings, interview by Oriana Yilma and Peter Blackmer, May 17, 2019, transcript, Voices from the Grassroots, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Detroit, MI.

speaks of her experiences as a water warrior and attorney in this case who fought against the legitimizing of a narrative which aimed to justify water shutoffs.

OY: Well, you spoke a little bit about this before, but could you elaborate on the origins of the Lyda [v. City of Detroit] case?

AJ: Well, the origins of the Lyda case was [laughs] I was sitting around talking to Marilyn Mullane of Neighborhood Legal Services, and we were actually working on the Flint--the Highland Park [Michigan] water case. We were talking about filing a lawsuit against them because they had just shut off water to Highland Park and they weren't sending out any bills, so people were sitting there using the water and accumulating bills, but they were not based on any real objective metering. And we were talking about that when they start shutting off water. And so, I said, "Let's get a group together and let's fight 'em!"

And it was actually Jerry Goldberg, who's a lawyer buddy of mine, his wife Chris (ph) had challenged the judge. She had been in court and she said, "Why don't you do something about this water? This is ridiculous!" So she told Jerry, "Why aren't you guys filing a lawsuit or something?" So Jerry said Chris went and challenged the judge, and the judge said he was gonna have the city of Detroit come to court Monday and talk about what had happened. And I said, "Well, what? Well, this is Thursday. Let's start writing a complaint!" [claps hands] We wrote a complaint in like two days. We filed it at three o'clock in the morning, and we went to court with the complaint having been filed about three o'clock that morning, and I walked up to the clerk and I said, "We're here 'cause we just filed a case for the people, citizens of the city of Detroit. Will the judge hear us?" So she went and talked to Judge, said, "Sure, Miss Jennings. Come on up!" So, [laughs] that's how we end up with the Lyda case. We had 14--I think 10 people. At that time, we probably had about 14 lawyers. We ended up with about 30.

Yeah, that's how that got started, just running our mouths, talking, and saying, "This ain't right. We cannot let this go down on our watch." And we...instead of me going home and watching House Hunters or [laughs] something else, Rachel Maddow, I sat and

wrote that complaint along with Jerry and Marilyn Mullane and Patricia Jones out of Seattle [Washington] at that -out of Washington, D.C. at that time, and we...we got busy. Kurt Thornbladh, yeah.

OY: Could you describe some of the most...

AJ: Okay (??).

OY: ...memorable or impactful moments from the proceedings?

AJ: One of —I think—the saddest moments of that proceeding was when the witnesses got on the stand and talked about what it was like to live without water, and we had about eight witnesses who testified. And it's like they'd go--would go to their bathroom or to their kitchen and they would think they still had water. You know how you keep do [mimes turning on faucet], and then you keep turning on the faucet and you don't have it. One of the mothers had eight children living in the home, and those children were her children and her daughter's children, and they were sending the little kids to school with dirty clothes and not being able to wash up except out of a water bottle, and they were being called stinky and smelly and thi...this just, you know, tears your heart apart. And the judge, you know, to his credit, he said, "Hey, that's horrible, and these things are terrible, and they may cause death! But this is a bankruptcy, and we must have money." Judge Rhodes, Steven Rhodes. So, he's retired now.

> But...so those were sad moments, you know. Those were very sad moments. [pause] But we kept going. We had Roger Colton, the expert water authority in the country on affordability. He testified very excellently. He said if you get a water affordability plan, it's gonna bring more money into the system. You will not have to cut off people at all. That's what he said, and so that's our theory and our theme for the national legislation. You will get more money into this process if you allow people to pay based on their ability. That's what water affordability is. If you make 10 dollars a week, then a certain percentage, four to five--three to four to five percent should be for water. So--but if you only, if you make 10 dollars a week,

eight dollars shouldn't be for water, and that's what was happening--is happening. Well, not was, is happening.

OY: What impacts did the Lyda [v. City of Detroit] case have on the broader water struggle?

AJ: I think it had a tremendous impact because after the...we also had...the United Nations came to the city. They spent four days with us. They went to neighborhoods. They went to community meetings. The rapporteurs made a finding that it was inhumane to not have water in a city the size of Detroit--or period, for anyone! And so we took that and began to build movement. The movement escalated. When I say 'we,' I mean People's Water Board, [Michigan] Welfare Rights, We the People. These are all organic organizations. Circle of Blue, different places. We're now doing a film called Water. We've got a small grant, the People's Water Board and the National Coalition for Water, and the film has been being edited now, but it...we...we filmed in six places, California, Detroit. We...we filmed at...on the Navajo nation. We filmed in Kentucky. We filmed in Alabama in Lowndes County.

I mean, so we're...the expansion of this...and then we have been involved with others who are doing the same thing but in their own circles, so we're trying to tie it all together with...so that this movement, water movement, becomes something where we will actually get a--like a civil rights law that says in these United States there should not be a human being that has to go without water because they can't afford it, shouldn't happen, should never happen.

OY: Could you give your analysis of the Headlee Amendment and the legal grounds for the water affordability plan?

AJ: Absolutely a crock of stuff. Headlee amendment, the Bolt [Bolt v. City of Lansing] case, none of it is really applicable to whether or not water affordability ordinance or a state statute or anything else comes into existence. It really was a

red herring that the city of Detroit used to try against...to...to go against us. In fact, it had been analyzed back in 2005 as not applying. It was analyzed by us, as the Lyda [v. City of Detroit] plaintiffs, to say why Bolt...the Bolt case and the issue of taxation and whether it was a tax or it was a fee, all of that is just not true. That's what I think about that. [laughs]

MONICA LEWIS-PATRICK[68]

In the following oral history Monica Lewis-Patrick tells us about the value of narrative in the organizing struggle in the Detroit water crisis. She discusses the types of storytelling ethics she's adopted as part of her role as a steward of the stories of those who have been impacted by water shutoffs. Monica Lewis Patrick describes the work she does to combat the exploitative practices associated with mainstream narratives by utilizing community centered practices in her storytelling as part of asserting the agency of those impacted. She shares examples of counter-narrative work that she's engaged in as part of We the People of Detroit such as, story collection from those who have suffered from water shutoffs, data collection, water testing, community surveys, and other forms. Monica's oral history shows us that narratives are constantly being leveraged by state and corporate powers to consolidate power and exploit communities. The work that Monica has been a part seeks to uplift counter-narratives as a way of reclaiming power from oppositional forces that value profits above people.

OH: How has the city changed since you first got here?

MLP: The city has changed in several ways you see a diluting of Black power both politically and economically. You've seen more of a drain and ciphering off of assets and resources. Definitely a strong transition from this long narrative of failed Black leadership and corruption to now you hear a lot about this manufactured narrative of come back. For me it almost sounds like "Make America Great" you know it has that same feel to it so

[68] Monica Lewis-Patrick, interview by Oriana Yilma and Peter Kramer, May 24, 2019, transcript, Voices from the Grassroots, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Detroit, MI.

when they talk about come back they're only talking about the 7.2 miles of downtown but what they leave out is that 80 percent of the contrived bankruptcy was on the backs of pensioners. A large portion of the population in the city of Detroit are elderly persons that stayed in the city when others abandoned the city. So your largest tax base in the city is usually your elderly your voting bloc in the city it's elderly. And so to know that history and be a part of family that really was blessed when Detroit was in its heyday and to know the richness of the culture and sacrifices that have happened here and then to see it sort of pimped for the wealthy for billionaires and millionaires to be able to subsidize their development projects on the backs of those that stayed and paid. I've got a grandmother that uses a term it sticks in my crawl. It just doesn't feel good to me to see that kind of assault and violence play out very openly. It's like being stuck up without a gun. You gone rob me and not even use a weapon and that's what I see playing out over the last ten years that I've been here.

OH: What does racism look like in Detroit today?

MLP: Racism looks like the ability to create a master narrative of failed Black leadership and then explain away stealing pensions.

PK: I want to dig in on one point that you made about building individual power and collective power and I'm wondering if you could kind of walk us through using water as an example like having communication--or talking to people who are in crisis situations. How do you frame that--or how do you help people to frame that crisis situation in a way that promotes that kind of individual empowerment?

MLP: I think there's a couple. We just had a session yesterday with a couple of women over at Brightmoor--Brightmoor Collective. It's a food pantry and in that neighborhood, in the last year and a half, we've seen over 700 births. And out of those 700 births over 500 of those births have seen low birth weight, premature, and then a large number of them miscarriages. And from the work that we've done with Nadia Gaber with UC Berkley what we've seen is that there's a cycle of social impact, of just being fearful that you're not going

to have water because you'll fear that they'll take your children. And so that added stress many times people know that the most vulnerable part of your pregnancy is that first trimester. So to have this kind of added pressure because you can live in a house without lights and gas, but if you don't have running water for 72 hours you can lose custody of your children.

That fear is real in this city and so from getting that information and then hearing stories yesterday from women telling stories of losing their water service for less than 35 cent... One woman told a story of being shutoff for ten cents. They shut her water off and they took--it cost her 80 dollars to get it turned back on. Well for a person on a fixed income if I was struggling to get you that ten cent then you have now created an even greater burden for me. Now I got to come up with 80 and then also pay you whatever the water service. And so we sit there and we listened and part of the struggle was I'm always tasked with trying to figure out the balance between when do we allow the media and sometimes what can be voyeuristic kinds of academic persons to come into our community and how do they come? And so some of the conversations have been with first of all making sure that these women understand that their story is their story. That they have control over it they have ownership over it.

So the media that wanted to come in what I said to them is that you can come and listen to this session but you can't tape anything and of course media people want to get what they're trying to get. And so we went back and forth and he said well you know I liked to and I said I understand you'd like to but even being allowed to come in and these women share these very vulnerable stories cause they don't know you they know me. They trust me and they trust me that I brought you in for a particular purpose but we're also very strategic about the fact that we are using media to reshape our narrative. Not giving the media the story they want and so we're real clear about that. We're unapologetic about that. So I've talked from this framework of first of all the power that we have is that we're shaping our stories we're not victims, we've been victimized but we're not victims. And

none of these conditions of poverty are our fault but it is our fight. And so using these kinds of mantras and languages of power of resistance taking examples like councilmember Watson who would never leave the table without giving you a history lesson about resistance and power things that we did to defy the odds in Detroit or just giving you a Coleman Young quote can be empowering to Detroiters. And so I use that tactic in our group settings. I talk about the fact that we are the home of the city that put the world on wheels. I talk about the fact that we are the arsenal of democracy still to this day because if you can get away with it in Detroit you can do it anywhere in America but if we can stop it in Detroit we can stop it anywhere in America. And then I talk about the fact that this city has been a city that has taken multiple hits around the fact that water shutoffs have given us a Black eye but then we've also taught people how to be able to reconnect the human infrastructure of caring that people have water. Cause first to address your issue I have to even care that you have an issue and so it's that kind of I think engagement and the other thing that I've think we've done is we've built a legacy of trust with our community.

Where they know that we'll fight a lion about Detroit and so even among the community we had an incident a couple weeks ago where a group of loved attorneys that we've worked with for years that know our community wanted us to participate in sharing third party information and so we resisted that. I said it's our policy that we don't share third party information, they said but Monica we're trying to help you with this lawsuit and they are they're helping with the lawsuit to try to put an injunction on them shutting off water. But it still is the We the People of Detroit policy that we don't share third party. So it was interesting to have an activist and a colleague that I love actually get angry because I wouldn't just defy a process to be able to meet a need but I went back to the board we had a conversation and we agreed it had to be done a certain way where the community was going to be able to be engaged on the front end as to whether they wanted their name and information shared and then making sure that they were fully informed that even with legal processes there is no guarantees. Because a lot of times communities are promised things

and then those promises don't come to fruition and I'm the one whose spent years building a reputation and relationship and that relationship--reputation could be in jeopardy and my reputation is more to me than money. I mean you can't buy it because I've worked for it and so I value that and that's why we don't trade it off. There's no amount of money you can give We the People of Detroit for our liberation and our freedom and that of our community.

CLAIRE MCCLINTON[69]

In the following oral history Claire McClinton describes the Flint community's initial discovery of the contaminated water and the media blackout they encountered while trying to bring attention to the issue. Claire explains the role the media continues to play in the Flint water crisis and the linkages she observed between media coverage and resource access for Flint residents. She shares specific examples of mainstream media narratives that have been used to justify and minimize the Flint Water Crisis and she also describes the work that organizers did to combat erasure and misrepresentation present in popular narratives about the Flint water crisis. Claire McClinton's oral history speaks directly to the power wielded by state and corporate leaders and their ability to manipulate narratives to excuse their negligence at the expense of people's lives.

MB: So, I guess how has water shutoffs entered the conversation in terms of…

CM: Well, even before the emergency manager, or just before the emergency manager, they were raising the water rates. Now, previous local administrations were using the water fund as a debit card to pay for other things and they… You know, there was a… The water was an asset for them as well. But after a while, it be--it got out of hand, and water, water bills were a challenge before the switch. It was beginning to. But, it didn't get any better after the switch. There was a temporary--several months where the state compensated

[69] Claire McClinton, interview by Marcia Ashley Black and Peter Kramer, August 22, 2019, transcript, Voices from the Grassroots, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Detroit, MI.

residents through paying some of the water bills or whatever. They...they gave the city so much money to lower our water rates because we couldn't use the water, so that's how they helped compensate, but that's gone. We begin…and everything trickled out slowly because we all know that the state never owed up to their role in what happened. It took them a long time to even admit there was a problem. As water warriors, we take credit for bringing this issue even to the national attention. They wasn't gonna bring it up. We were bringing it up. The water smells. My hair's falling out. I'm breaking out in rashes. People are beginning to wa--you know, to more and more be vocal and stuff. And so, what we say is through our energies and our efforts we was able to even put the water crisis in Flint on the national stage. We finally got national attention in January of 2016.

And I remember being in January of 2015, when we were beginning to say something is wrong with this water. Now, we didn't know about lead and all that. I had the opportunity to speak in Detroit where they had brought the United Nations in, and it was a community gathering and so I was asked to come and speak about what was going on in Flint. And I remember one of the things I shared with them was that General Motors in October--now, our water was switched in April 2015, I mean [20]14. That October of the same year, General Motors said we can't take it no more. This water is rusting our engine parts. That was about six months of being on the water. The emergency manager and the state allowed General Motors to go back to the Detroit system, and we had to stay on the Flint system. And when I shared that with that audience, a woman came up to me. She said, I cannot believe what you, what you just shared. She said she googled it on her phone 'cause she didn't believe it that they would allow General Motors to go back to Detroit when the water was rusting engine parts right over there at the engine plant on the south side of Flint. They were allowed to switch. And when we confronted the emergency manager at that time--we've had different ones, but Darnell Earley, who rarely came out in public setting but he was over at University of Michigan--and we challenged him about that. How can you let General Motors off of this water that's so corrosive and allow the

residents to continue to use the water? And he said, and I quote, “That’s apples and oranges.” That’s apples and oranges. So, that’s how ruthless this situation became.

And again, that was before we knew anything about lead. It wasn’t until one of the residents here, LeeAnne Walters, a housewife and you know. And you know, people were bathing their children. Their children were breaking out in stuff, and so she got on the phone and started...she went, took her kids to the doctors. They couldn’t understand why they were breaking out and blah blah blah, but one thing led to another and she’s the one that...she was one of the people who helped make the water crisis a game-changer as far as bringing the issue out because she got a hold to the Environmental Protection Agency Region Five out of Chicago and she lucked up and spoke with Miguel Del Toral, and he was one of the good guys in the agency and said something is wrong. And then from there, one thing led to another. Then, Dr. Mona [Hanna-] Attisha and different ones, you know, was just… and Marc Edwards came here. We went out and we were citizen scientists. We collected water. We were trying to alarm the people that the water wasn’t safe even though the authorities were saying, “Your water’s fine. Don’t worry. Just relax!” And we were out there getting samples so that the people would know, and that was a big challenge.

In...in all of these issues, whether you talking about the union movement or whatever, one of the biggest challenges you have is to make the people aware and raise the consciousness of the people. And that go--whatever you’re doing, and whatever you’re trying to do, you...that’s...that’s a challenge. Why? Because the powers-that-be are creating their own narratives and putting ‘em out there, and they have access to the television, they have access to the...the talk shows, and they have access… So they put their own narrative out there, and so as an activist, trying to change the narrative because people did not know their water was not safe because the mayor told you it was fine. You know. So, that’s all a part of... but eventually, the biggest breakthrough I could say was people were beginning to catch on something wasn’t right in Flint. And we did those… We called ourselves citizen scientists and went around and gathered water, you know, samples for… And finally, with

Marc Edwards from Virginia Tech [Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University]. It blew up from there. And then Dr. Mona came in, and then they told her she was slicing and dicing statistics.

You know, so it's always that narrative out there by the powers-that-be to undo or...or try to supplant and suppress just causes. Mmhmm. So we went through that, too. We didn't just wake up one day and say, well, the water's not safe. No. We have been seeing it since 2014, but in January of 2016--16!--Sincere [Smith] showed up on the cover of Time Magazine and the media blackout was broken. So, breaking the media blackout is something that we claim victory for even exposing the problem, and we're still in the phases of trying to, what, fix the problem. But, that was a victory to just even make it known.

MB: And so what does, like, organizing look like now, given that it's still an issue?

CM: Well, what it looks like now is that, like, for example, because the enemy is still busy. The devil is still busy, so they haven't, like, took their marbles and went home. They still haven't. They have...there's much work to do to re...reconstruct the damage that they have done. But also, they're busy because one of the things that Flint did that we claim victory for--and I, I told you we got finally busted through the media blackout. But not only that, it made people all over this country pay attention to their water. I mean, I was out in California and I was reading an article--and I was out there to speak about this water crisis in Flint--and I was reading an article in the paper and this...this one school, high school, the parents said, "Well, wait a minute, we want you to check...check the water. Is the water," you know. After Flint, everybody went, "Wait, wait, let me check my water," you know. So, they were out there and it was a very well-to-do high school, right on the...up in the mountains or something, you know, Beverly Hill-type school. And so, the parents were confronting the...the administration and said, "We want to make sure that our water is safe." And they said, "Oh, our...Oh, the water's fine.

You have nothing to worry about." And the parents said, "That's what they told Flint," you know. So, it's… And then now, Newark, New Jersey is going through a disaster. It's almost like the cloth has been cut, how you deal with this. First, just give 'em a little water then, downplay it that it's not that bad. You know, we can almost tell them, this what's gonna happen next. You know, so they giving 'em two cases of water per family a week. They did us like that, you know and so, this is gonna be a challenge all over this country. And I think now the way they're treating us it's almost like we can't let the Flint experience end with reconciliation and reconstruction because if we do, then we're gonna have to do it all over this country.

And so, the latest thing that happened here is there's a doctor at Hurley Hospital [Hurley Medical Center], Dr. [Hernan] Gomez, who came out with a report last year, and he...he...he...he published an opinion piece in the New York Times and in that opinion piece he said, "Well, the children in Flint weren't really poisoned. They were just exposed to the lead."[70] And so, this is at the same time, that the state is beginning to withdraw the bottled water program from Flint. So, here the narrative continues. And...and just recently, he's coming out with an article saying that a lot of the miscarriages and stillbirths were not--that it's extremely unlikely that it had anything to do with the water. So, they are already going back to that old narrative of trying to minimize what was done to us, you know. And so, we're going back, we've been going back and forth with the state because they say, "Well, okay, we're gonna give you some water then. Oh, your water's fine now. We're gonna take it away." Even if the water is pure as the driven snow, we have so many health impacts and health effects that we will be living with this for years to come.

[70] Hernán Gómez and Kim Dietrich, "The Children of Flint Were Not 'Poisoned'", July 22, 2018, *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/22/opinion/flint-lead-poisoning-water.html

> Now, our groups have come together--and like, there were a number of groups that popped up all over Flint. We had one group called Flint Water Class Action, Florissa Fowler, and...and what she does is she has a kickass website that she posts everything dealing with Flint and the water and related subjects. And then we have groups, Water You Fighting For, we have the Flint Rising. So it's...it's several, it's a number of groups, and so we collaborate periodically on what's the latest and the greatest challenge that we're gonna have to confront. And we did--and we do things, it's no ki--it's no regular thing. Like we showed up at the...in Lansing for the lame duck session where they attempted to strip Dana Nessel's power from her. They were gonna let the legislature decide which cases that she could litigate. Well, we got a case going on now that's not been settled about the water. Y'all are the ones that poisoned us, so if we sit here and let y'all decide what cases you might just throw Flint's case in the paper shredder. So we have to go down there and fight to protect the Attorney General. You know, things like that--that's not everything as directly related, but it has an impact on our future. And what this doctor is doing now, there hasn't been anybody tried and convicted for the Flint water crisis, and we have not been compensated as far as damages for what has happened to us. So, we still in the thick of the fight.

Claire McClinton speaks directly to the ties between media representation and resource access. It was not until they broke through the media blackout that they received an acknowledgement of the urgency of the crisis and began to receive resources to address it. It was also when the media left that state and corporate powers were able to continue the capitalist culture of negligence. Even following the poisoning of thousands of Flint residents, profits were still placed above people. Claire reveals that media attempts to downplay the Flint water crisis is one tactic of many being used by state and corporate powers who are working to justify its reasoning to deny the people of Flint the restoration and reparations to which they are entitled.

The institutionalization of white supremacy, patriarchy, anti-blackness, and capitalism enable these types of state-facilitated narratives to flourish while narratives which affirm Black lives as more valuable than profits are suppressed and under-invested in. The importance of counter-narrative work in their organizing was emphasized by many Black women water warriors in their oral histories. The counter-narratives that they create and promote uplift the voices of folks who are directly impacted and inform the types of solutions that Black women water warriors advocate for. While mainstream media has promoted a narrative that people are not paying because they want to cheat the system and are irresponsible, it was through Black women water warriors engagement with counter-narrative work that they were able to find out that many of the people impacted simply cannot afford water. A narrative that has been supported by data showing that Detroit has one of the highest water rates in the country. These oral histories by Black women water warriors show that not only are histories not neutral but they have a material impact and influence on people's quality of life and specifically in this case it has impacted poor and working class Black Detroiters ability to access an essential life sustaining resource, water.

Local, National, Global Orientation: Detroit to Flint Water Justice Journey

The water crisis is one symptom of a larger crisis, where globally profits are valued over people. The institutionalization of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy enables these crises to persist. The Detroit Water Crisis does not exist within a silo therefore the organizing in response to the crisis has involved engagement at the local, national, and global level. From the start, Black women water warriors have grounded their organizing in the belief that the water issue is systemic and therefore requires organizing which addresses the many ways and many places that it exists. Their commitment to engaging the water crisis as one that exists without borders can even be seen in the fact that the beginnings of organizing in the Detroit Water Crisis is rooted in the organizing which occurred in response to Highland Park's water crisis. Black women water warriors have

been a part of multiple endeavors to make sure that this interconnectedness is acknowledged and strategically leveraged.

In "Detroit to Flint and Back Again: Solidarity Forever", Shea Howell, Michael Doan, and Ami Harban, researchers and organizers with Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management (D-REM), describe how community groups in Detroit and Flint "advanced common struggles for clean, safe, affordable water as a human right, particularly during the period of 2014 to 2016."[71] They discuss the indigenous, geographical, and systemic connections which have drawn Flint and Detroit together in their fight for access to clean and affordable water. The authors detail the role of storytelling and counter-narrative organizing in bringing attention to the connections between the Detroit Water Crisis and the Flint Water crisis, and how it has also helped to build and strengthen relationships with organizers across borders. The authors provide multiple examples of events and actions that demonstrate organizers' engagement with the water crisis as interconnected, and something that extends beyond the borders of their localities. One example they discuss is the "Detroit to Flint Water Justice Journey" which was a solidarity action led by Detroit and Flint water warriors. From July 3-10, 2015 participants embarked on a 70-mile journey from Detroit to Flint with stops in cities like Highland Park, Bloomfield Hills, Clarkston, Holly, Grand Blanc, Flint, and Lansing. They used this action as an opportunity to bring attention to the interconnectedness of the issue, build relationships, share stories, and rally people along the way. According to Howell et.al,

> One major goal of the walk was to counter widespread perceptions of Detroit and Flint as dis- connected and alone in facing water-related problems. The information packet distributed through- out the walk linked together three major problems: mass water shutoffs, unaffordable water and sewage services, and toxic, unhealthy, dangerous water (Samartino, 2015). It also highlighted two corresponding demands: (1) implement the 2005 WAP ('Assistance is not Affordability'); and (2) provide clean, healthy water relief to the people of Flint (Samartino, 2015; see also MWRO et al., 2015; PWB, 2015). The organizers insisted that water unaffordability and deprivation in Detroit and water contamination in Flint must be understood in relation to each other and rectified together, connected as they are to the same underlying problems: sacrificing the basic needs of people in the name of profit and privatization, prioritizing corporate interests over the

[71] Sharon Howell, Michael D. Doan, and Ami Harbin, "Detroit to Flint and Back Again: Solidarity Forever," *Critical Sociology 45*, no. 1 (January 2019): 1, doi:10.1177/0896920517705438.

people's good, and seizing control of land and resources maintained by predominantly African American communities. [72]

What this journey illustrated was the existence of the final theme, a local, national, and global working-class fight for water rights—borne out of a recognition of clean and affordable water as a human right. The goal of this journey aligns with the radical Black feminist organizing and thought traditions which guided the activism of Black women like Johnnie Tillmon, Maureen Taylor, and Marian Kramer. In the following oral histories, Black women water warriors Charity Hicks, Claire McClinton, and Monica Lewis-Patrick share their perspectives on the interconnectedness of the water struggle and their experience engaging in solidarity work.

CHARITY HICKS[73]

In the following oral history Charity Hicks provided an in-depth analysis of the role of global capitalism in facilitating the decline of Detroit and what can be described as global seizures of water via privatization. Charity goes on to discuss the water affordability plan which was constructed by a coalition of organizations including Michigan Welfare Rights Organization under the leadership of Maureen Taylor and Marian Kramer. She also discusses the role of the World Health Organization and United Nations in affirming that the Detroit Water Crisis is one part of a larger global water crisis.

> **CH:** Capitalist decided there's cheap labor around the world, divested from this automotive place, the parks the build-out of cars, chasing cheap labor, slave labor around the world to pad their profit margins. And so Detroit was systematically divested from, particularly in the formation of syndicates, unions, that created collective bargaining, collectivizing the interest of workers, their quality of life, and so what ended up happening was: capitalists were done. They were like, Look, we're sick of strikes, we're sick of you guys trying to defend and affirm your human rights and your dignity, and we want to be in a place where

[72] Sharon Howell, Michael D. Doan, and Ami Harbin, "Detroit to Flint and Back Again: Solidarity Forever," 10.
[73] Kate Levy, "Charity Hicks," filmed 2014. Vimeo video, 1:29:42. https://vimeo.com/97235613

there's no EPA, we want to be in a place where there's no standards, we want to be in a place where labor will be labor and human communities will be beholden to us for anything we give them. What ended up happen was, Michigan's massively divested. So, around 2000, massive amounts of people were getting their water shut off. The last we heard from the Water Board was 42,000 households had water shut off. We cringed because we thought about people not brushing their teeth, not washing, not being able to cook, not being able to clean, not being able to take a shower. And we were like: this is an affront to human dignity. Michigan Welfare Rights, Marian Kramer and Maureen Taylor actually co-constructed with a whole team of people at Michigan Welfare Rights this massive, beautifully constructed, public interest Affordability Plan for Detroit. So it's like a citizen-lead policy piece to affirm the human dignity of all of us, allow us access to something foundational, the quality of life, but at the same time meet the cost of the infrastructure. We're going to pay for our infrastructure, we're not just, like, give us stuff for free. We're like, let's meet the cost of the infrastructure, lets' keep the rates low and let's all participate. So it is a real potent way to affirm our commons, and water is our commons, whether we can pay for it or not, it's our commons.

So the backdrop of that was, the UN too was looking at water and they created a rapporteur, a rapporteur for water and sanitation and they started to look at access to sanitation, which was dependent on a lot of their health work. So WHO, World Health Org, and all of these people doing vaccinations and looking at quality of life are starting to say, "Water is impacting us." Cholera outbreaks, hepatitis outbreaks and all of these things were exacerbated by limited access to fresh, affordable and quality water. And so they connected the dots and internationally people started to look at water as a rights and access to sanitation and we started to look internally inside of the United States. It's the same thing that happens in Africa or in the Philippines or in Korea or all over the world. It's happening inside of the United States. Your human dignity should not be truncated because you're priced out of the commodification of an essential resource. And that's what was happening

in Detroit, so we relegated whole segments of our community and diminished their human dignity because they couldn't afford to pay. So that's what birthed the water access and affordability plan. They claimed that they could get sued [the Water Board] – we asked for 50 cents from all the rate-payers to go into a font to help [shroud?] those who couldn't afford to participate. And we have no idea where that money went. So they've been collecting money on people's bills asking them to kind of like support people's access and what happened is, the money was collected and we have no idea where it's at.

CLAIRE MCCLINTON[74]

Claire McClinton shares a memory of her first meeting of Mama Lila when the Detroit to Flint Water Justice Journey made a stop in Flint, Michigan. In this oral history she highlighted the relationship between Detroit and Flint water warriors. This was seen not only in the Detroit to Flint Water Justice Journey, but also in Mama Lila's actions upon her arrival to Flint when she showed her admiration for Flint organizers by handing them flowers. It's a simple act but illustrates the solidarity that existed between Detroit and Flint water warriors.

MB: And can you share--[clears throat] thank you--and can you share a little bit about how you knew Mama Lila Cabbil?

CM: Well, I met her because after we were going through our water situation, they had a big, they had a big confer--they have conferences all the time in Detroit, big, you know. And they had this big water conference, and some of the women from here said we need to have a march from Detroit to Flint. And so...and it stopped in Pontiac and, you know. But anyway, that's when I met Mama Lila, when it...when that march arrived in Detroit. I had seen her before, but I didn't know her. And when that march arrived in Flint--and they had spent the night at this church [Woodside Church in Flint, where the interview was filmed]-- but it wasn't, this church was in a different location--and the...the, this church

[74] Claire McClinton, interview by Marcia Ashley Black and Peter Kramer, August 22, 2019, transcript, Voices from the Grassroots, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Detroit, MI.

offered to let them sleep there, you know. And so, the next morning they met up in front of city hall and had a rally. And Mama Lila had brought flowers to give everybody that was an activist, a little, just a little bouquet of pretty flowers. She had that touch about her, that nurturing is what I called it, nurturing touch. Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

MONICA LEWIS-PATRICK[75]

Monica Lewis-Patrick discusses some of the solidarity work she engaged in with the Flint Crisis through the leadership of Debra Lewis a founding member of We the People Detroit, who is a self-proclaimed Flintstone (born and raised in Flint, MI). Monica also shares memories of her interactions with Nayyriah Shariff and Claire McClinton. She goes on to give her perspective on the interconnectedness of Flint and Detroit to each other, as well as the national and global connections that exist in water rights organizing. Monica provides examples of actions and tactics used by Detroit water warriors. These actions have not only furthered the fight for water, but also demonstrated their connections and commitments to all communities impacted by water insecurity.

PK: In march so it's' like some of the lessons that I was hearing from Claire McClinton and how like being in this struggle for this period of time has given a completely new insight into power structures and that kind of analysis. So I guess that's my long-winded way of asking [Monica laughs] that's my long-winded way of asking like about your collaborative work with organizers in Flint and like how through that collaboration you've grown or what lessons have you learned through that kind of work?

MLP: I mean the first thing I'll have to say is I have to give all of that credit to Debra Taylor who is from Flint and it was because of Deb's deep relationship as a Flintstone that we sort of got entered (sp?) into places that they probably wouldn't have allowed us just because the wounds were so deep everything was so raw. I mean things are still not if there's ever going to be normal again and so I really have to credit that and then she spent

[75] Monica Lewis-Patrick, interview by Oriana Yilma and Peter Kramer, May 24, 2019, transcript, Voices from the Grassroots, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Detroit, MI.

about six months during that hard winter of 2014 going into 2015 going up to Flint matter of fact she had two car accidents that summer--that winter because of the weather. Going up to make sure she kept her meetings cause that was the other thing we committed to--to make sure we showed up when we said. If they needed support we made sure that in conversations even to this day people call us all the time wanting us to give an interview about Flint and Mama Claire, Nayyirah, Melissa, others will tell you Leann I reach out I say guys so so Al Jazeera, CNN, MSNBC whomever is trying to get ahold of you. And then you know of course because the trust is so deep they'll say we don't have the capacity Monica you got it do it or--but just that checking in and honoring you know that even though we have a water crisis its a different crisis and recognizing that when you work in the framework of the beloved community there's enough capacity to love through your own struggles to help somebody else through theirs.

And I would say that Flint has done the same thing for Detroit. Flint was the first to show up when we were dealing at the height of our water shutoffs. They been continuous in making sure that when they're talking about their water struggle that they're connecting it to our water struggle and other water struggles. They have been the poster child of being through that kind of spiritual draining assault where you're fighting not only for your reputation and for your democracy and for your local control but then you're fighting for your health and your children's health and your mama's health and you might have to take your auntie to the doctor and now your daddy can't work and I know women in that city that are dealing with all of those dynamics and their own health issues and going to work every day. So what we try to do is in terms of narrative shaping is anytime I get an opportunity I have to talk about that revolutionary leadership. See it's one thing to jump in line with a protest where its 4000, people and everybody’s going to do it for about four hours then we're going to get a burger and get a beer and go home. It’s another thing when I'm five years deep and the story ain't hot no more and you might of gave water two years ago but you ain't feeling it no more you then moved on. You might be protesting with the

abortion movement now. Well they still don't have water and even though they have water coming out of their tap they can't trust the quality of it they can't afford it their paying the highest rates in the nation for water they cannot consume but guess what if they don't pay it even though they know it's not quality water they lose their children they lose their home. So my belovedness has to say to me yeah Monica you working in Detroit but ain't you got time to check on your sister and your brother and jump in the car with Deb and go to Flint and that show we rolled. It wasn't anything like orchestrated like oh the activist strategy book says [Monica laughs] no its a here thing you know its responding like I could be going through my own relationship stuff if my sister call I'm a be like baby I need a minute I got to talk to my sister and that's how we treat our organizing here. When you look at the legacy of people like General Gordon Baker [pause] you know General Gordon Baker is not a revolutionary hero to Detroiters he's a labor icon around the world because he understood that the struggles that were happening to poor Black folks here in Detroit were happening to poor white folks in the Appalachia in Kentucky and what's happening to immigrants that were in this country work and it was happening to Navajo women he understood that. And out of that principle of understanding that he actually shared that the philosophy throughout his life.

So when you talk about a Claire McClinton from Flint--Claire McClinton was a part of sort of being that student of General Baker she's a part of that legacy of resistance that built the middle class through the auto industry. Claire McClinton was one of the first people when emergency management was ticking the path Claire McClinton was the first person to show up in Detroit and say put my name on the lawsuit. When some people were standing back a little scared trying to see which way the wind was gone blow so when Claire McClinton called and said Monica and Deb we need some water in Flint we didn't flinch. We lined up UHAULS and got a few of brothers that came and loaded up trucks and we drove to Flint and we been going to Flint ever since. And our commitment to Flint is that we will not stop delivering water to Flint until Flint says the pipes are fixed.

PK: I guess along those same lines like can you--can you explain to us the global context of the water crisis and the global responses like you mentioned that interconnectedness between Detroit and Flint what does that look like on a global scale and what's the policy of that?

MLP: Oh it's bananas. Its bananas. I tell you when--when we go anywhere probably the most impactful story I can tell you about that experience of global and national impact when you say you're Detroit. In 2014 this is when after Charity had transitioned Tawana Petty had been invited to the United Nations to have a conversation around water sanitation. And it was the same time the climate march was going on in New York and so we get to the march and we're like the march is like two thirds up the street and the marshal runs up and we've got on these grey We the People t shirts and there's just two of us it ain't like its ten or twenty where you'd say oh that's a crowd. And the marshall runs up and says Detroit well you know being a Detroiter you feeling flattered [Monica laughs] how'd you know? And she said come with me. So we start walking with her and we're thinking she was gone put us in the line and she was like no you guys got to go to the front of the line the line is blocks away so we're back and we get like right before like the fire engines is where we get at. She escorts us through the middle of the climate march and at each station as we go through the climate march with the HBCUs and you know we cutting up with them [Monica sings] "Whose Water? Our water? Whose water? Our water?" I mean we're having a ball she's like no you're coming with me we get to the next juncture we get here it may be immigrant workers you know so we're talking to them some of them are speaking in Spanish and we like "No Espanola but we stand in solidarity you know".. They like [yelling] "Detroit!" You know and so you like yeah you get to the next station and you might see like it might be a bunch of hippies you know from where ever and they were just like Detroit and I mean it's like oh my god the love you know. She's like you no come on we get to the next station and the Native American family members have had themselves petitioned off like they had marshals all around them you couldn't get near 'em they didn't

want their picture taken and I mean it was like real standoffish so we're standing there and we're walking and then we hear all of this noise and it's the delegation from Detroit. And we all end up together and the French journalist are following us and I'm saying each juncture you're hearing every step of the way Detroit. I get to the peace people like all of these sisters and nuns for peace and Tawana's making fun of me because I had got them chanting, "When our water is under attack what do you do? Stand up fight back!" She's like you got the nuns talking about fighting [Monica laughs] but they were having such a good time but to see Detroit embraced in such an honorable way and with a lot of love and respect for our work around climate justice the work that's come out of EMEAC.

The work that Charity has done the work that's come out of Mama Rhonda Anderson in Sierra Club I mean my god fifteen years of her being pretty much the only person of color holding down that environmental justice space in this area is just unbelievable but that was Detroit sort of setting the bar. The asthma capital of the world and then she's teaching people on you know cancer and what's happening with asthma but their then also these people are empowering themselves to shift beyond that trauma so it was that. And the same thing sort of happened for us when we were at another setting with some young people and to be at the Climate March at the University of Michigan just a couple of months ago for World Water Day and to have three--four thousand students where they only invited five adults and then to be one of those adults that they invited because of the work of We the People of Detroit and then to see these young people actually have created ten demands and one of those demands is that the University of Michigan would divest out of fossil fuels but that also that person with support the elimination of the shutting off of water and embrace a water affordability plan for Detroit and beyond. To me that said to me that our work is planted in good soil that is yielding good fruit that young people are not leaders of tomorrow they're leading right now. It gives us hope at We the People of Detroit and I can tell you as a Black mother of four children that when we don't have we hope we have nothing and our hope is our children and so to see the innovation

and to see the creativity and to know the artistry (sp?) because that's another thing that needs to be lifted up. It was young people taking their art spoken word, hip hop, you know the ability to do graphic art Antonio was looking at ten years for just spray painting Free the Water but for us it was such a badge of honor to see that he was using his art in a way that was messaging really a social justice consciousness in that moment.

And the same is true with Tawana Petty who just one day after walking with me to deliver water to mothers at the Northend of Detroit and we went to house to house and each woman told us they didn't need water. And then you would find out as you walk to the next house the other sister would say yeah she need water take her some water. And it was after that--it was raining and we're crying as we deliver this water and then Tawana Petty comes back and creates this amazing poem, "hell from a city where the water is off, 45 from Flintstone where they pickin us off, they thought they had us cornered but they pissed us off we done come together who would of thought" and I just love that because I was there when she experienced it and we still choke up a bit when you realize that people running water hoses from house to house. But then I always think about Tawana always reminding me that's Beloved Detroit that even people may be struggling economically they love each other enough they have enough human consciousness to care that each other has water. So I'm betting on Beloved Detroit.

Charity Hicks, Claire McClinton, and Monica Lewis-Patricks demonstrate the importance of a local, global, and national lens in their organizing as water warriors. They put this interconnected lens into practice through their commitment to solidarity with other communities experiencing water crisis'. Their solidarity in practice can be described as reciprocated investments into other communities experiencing a water crisis with the understanding that all water crises are connected. Water has been a good conduit for these solidarity practices for symbolic, strategic, and practical reasons. Despite the colonial geographical constructs which create false boundaries all over the world; water is something that connects us all regardless of our physical location. The organizing of the Black women water warriors brings forth an important reality that a threat to

water rights anywhere is a threat to water rights everywhere. From the beginning, the Detroit Water Crisis has been seen just as much of a local fight as a global fight. The belief that the root issue is that the world is dictated by cultures and structures which continue to place profits above people means that this moment requires a united working-class movement to address this root. Black women water warriors I think have assembled a Black internationalist perspective that is grounded in a Black radical feminist thought traditions and their experience engaging in grassroots organizing in Detroit. These ideas can be applied to other organizing issues which involve confronting powers that receive their power via global and racial capitalism.

Conclusion

If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.

- The Combahee River Collective, 1977

Black women water warriors in Detroit have made critical contributions to the water struggle through their organizing and their intellectual offerings. They are not a monolith, but this research shows that they do share commonalities in their approach. This research describes the intellectual traditions present in Black women water warriors' organizing and their roots in Black feminism. The Detroit water crisis has already been documented in various formats and this research contributes to that documentation while also making a Black feminist intervention in the retelling of the Detroit water crisis. Centering and honoring the organizing and intellectual contributions made by Black women water warriors in how we tell the story about the Detroit Water Crisis struggle is an opportunity to adjust focus and acknowledge the influence of race, gender, and class, both in the systematic attacks on people's access to water but also in the response of the community. Black feminism is present even when it is not explicitly named, and it is not limited only to those who explicitly identify as a Black feminist.

Preserving the legacy of Black women water warrior Charity Hicks was my initial motivation in doing this research. The work she did is foundational to the Detroit water crisis struggle and continues to provide a vision for what's possible. I quickly learned throughout my research that Charity Hicks' contributions stand shoulder-to-shoulder with other water warriors, some who have been named in this research and many others whose story have yet to be told. Black women water warriors are not the only ones on the frontlines, but their leadership and contributions in the Detroit water crisis struggle should be acknowledged for its fundamental value to the struggle. This research is a celebration of their thought tradition and presents a counter-narrative of the Detroit water crisis struggle that centers the perspective of Black women water warriors who exist as critical agents in the fight for water rights.

As previously stated, this project is the beginning of a larger commitment to document ongoing radical organizing occurring in Detroit, specifically work being led by Black women and Black queer + trans people. Moving forward I hope to continue to invest in the work of documenting Black women water warriors organizing in the Detroit water crisis. There are limitations in this research that I plan to address in the future to give a more complete narrative of the organizing Black women water warriors led. All the women listed have not contributed oral histories and I did not conduct all of the oral histories. This is significant because I believe there are more instances in their organizing which demonstrate the influence of Black feminism which were not explored in this research. My hope is that as this research develops there will be a space created for group conversations amongst Black women water warriors to speak in more detail about how they have influenced each other's organizing and how their identity as Black women have influenced their work. This research has begun to answer that question but there is so much more to be said.

REFLECTIONS ON A BLACK QUEER FEMINIST ARCHIVAL PRAXIS

A Black queer feminist archival praxis incorporates values and practices found within radical Black queer feminist traditions into traditional archival practices and processes. It was something I imagined over the course of my studies while in search of ways to fill the gap in histories documenting the experiences of Black queer people and women specifically. The approach to addressing the lack of recognition, as well as misrepresentation of Black people's stories, is often to try and repurpose the archival discipline, to stretch itself to hold these stories -- but what if it can't? It's not hard to believe that a discipline whose construction is rooted in the imagination of white cishetero men is unable to accommodate the types of stories and counter narratives we now seek to become a part of the archive. There are methods of remembering and recording that extend well beyond the archival discipline. A Black queer feminist archival praxis is an opportunity to imagine and engage a method of archiving that was created wholly with Black people of the diaspora in mind. Below are a list of eight principles which I use to describe a Black

queer feminist archival praxis as well as short descriptions of how they've been utilized in this research:

1) Regards race, class, gender, and sexuality as essential to holistically representing our histories.
    a) Black feminism necessitates an engagement with the intersection of identities and their ability to shape people's realities. In action, this includes recognizing the impact of these identities on the people and subjects we are archiving and working to intentionally include an analysis which acknowledges the complexity of the subject. Focusing on Black women water warriors in the retelling of Detroit water crisis, is one way that I am working to more holistically represent the history of the water struggle in Detroit.
2) Highlights personal relationships and community connections as imperative to the shaping of our legacies.
    a) At the core, radical grassroots organizing occurs through the relationships and community connections we invest in. The knowledge that we generate is not created in a silo but is directly influenced by the communities we are a part of. With this in mind, it is necessary to make sure that the influence of those personal relationships and community connections are also acknowledge in our documentation of legacies. This research puts this into practice by looking at the relationships that the Black women water warriors had with each other and their communities as a generative space. It also played an active role in the development of their contributions, and was necessary to document in this retelling of the Detroit water crisis struggle.
3) Prioritizes Black people's agency in the preservation process.
    a) Black people's exploitation is normalized in all aspects of our society. A BQFAP is one that is grounded in informed and enthusiastic consent throughout the process. In addition, acknowledging and respecting the agency of Black people requires a

reflection of how archival work can be of service for the community being documented. I utilized this principle in my initial discussions with Black women water warriors about this project. I sought out advice throughout the process about how this project might be best of service for the ongoing organizing work in the water struggle.

4) Utilizes fluid definitions of "documents" and "records" that center Black cultural methods of memory making.

   a) White supremacist capitalist informed parameters of what is an official or legitimate documentation leaves out much of the records that Black people create. A BQFAP critiques these definitions and acknowledges and makes room in the archive for the wide range of formats in which Black people's history is stored. Additionally, as Black people continue to invest in repairment of erased and misrepresented histories, new materials are being created to document histories and a BQFAP views these materials as legitimate sources of information. In this research, oral histories were engaged with as documents which center and preserve a history and experiences which were previously unknown. In doing so, this research added to the records and documents which currently exist on the subject of the Detroit Water Crisis.

5) Prioritizes community dialogue as fundamental to preservation.

   a) A BQFAP views archiving as an organizing tool which has the potential to radicalize people as they participate in the documentation and preservation process. Pulling from the lessons that community archiving offers, community dialogue is also necessary in the creation of sustainable grassroots archival institutions which cannot and should not survive without community buy-in. A BQFAP requires community dialogue to be integrated into the archiving process from the start and not as an afterthought. This research integrated community dialogue in the design

of this research and will continue to integrate it in the development of an outreach strategy to share the histories documented in this research.

6) Unapologetically asserts that Black women are inherently valuable.
    a) The Combahee River Collective's politics had a direct influence on my development of a BQFAP. With this in mind it felt necessary to reaffirm the value of Black women, as part of this praxis. To accept Black women's inherent value means to also be open to seeing them as critical agents, knowledge creators, and intellectuals. Black women are not excluded from these identities and a BQFAP makes room for their contributions to the archival process and the subject being documented. Black women water warriors are placed as the field experts in this historical retelling, which was important to affirming and documenting their role as critical agents and intellectuals in the water struggle
7) Aims to dismantle anti-black cishetero patriarchal values as normalized historically in preservation.
    a) In addition to acknowledging the multitude of identities which inform the experience of the people and subjects we archive, a BQFAP requires that we not be complicit in accepting these systems and the biases that are wrapped into identities. Instead as memory workers and archivists we have to acknowledge the power and responsibility we hold in our roles and be vigilant in confronting and challenging these systems. In action this includes rejecting the white supremacist notion of neutrality and taking an active rather than passive stance in our documentation and preservation methods. In this research, I echoed the analysis shared by the organizers that the core issue is that people are placed above profits. In doing this I aimed to contribute to the counter-narratives that are already creating which challenge these systems.
8) Cultivates space to heal ourselves, our ancestors, and our communities both present and future.

a) Black people, especially those who are descendants of enslaved Africans, have traumas wrapped up in history both because of the histories that are unavailable to us and never will be but also in those histories which are known but are closely intertwined with unthinkable violence. A BQFAP requires a space for necessary reflection and healing as seen fit by those who are involved in the archiving process. Documenting and preserving Black people can be viewed as an opportunity to rectify some of the trauma that has been experienced by ourselves, our ancestors, and our communities. Healing was a guiding force in this research. The loss of Charity Hicks and Mama Lila was a blow to the Detroit organizing community and reflecting on and celebrating their legacies in this research was an opportunity for participants and future readers to take part in a healing ceremony.

This praxis was created through the merging of my experiences as a Black queer woman, organizer, memory worker, and archivist from Detroit. All these identities assemble to describe a process which acknowledges the mental and spiritual healing potential of documenting and correcting the preservation of Black histories, especially histories of descendants of enslaved Black people. There is a critical need for an archival process that is suited to document the radical Black legacies being created in this moment, and I think a Black Queer Feminist Archival Praxis brings us closer to these possibilities. As a person early in my archival career, I still have much to learn and I am excited to take the next step of exploring more what it looks to put this praxis into action, in a practical sense.

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